

























**THE YOUNG TIMBER-CRUISERS**

*OR*

**FIGHTING THE SPRUCE PIRATES**

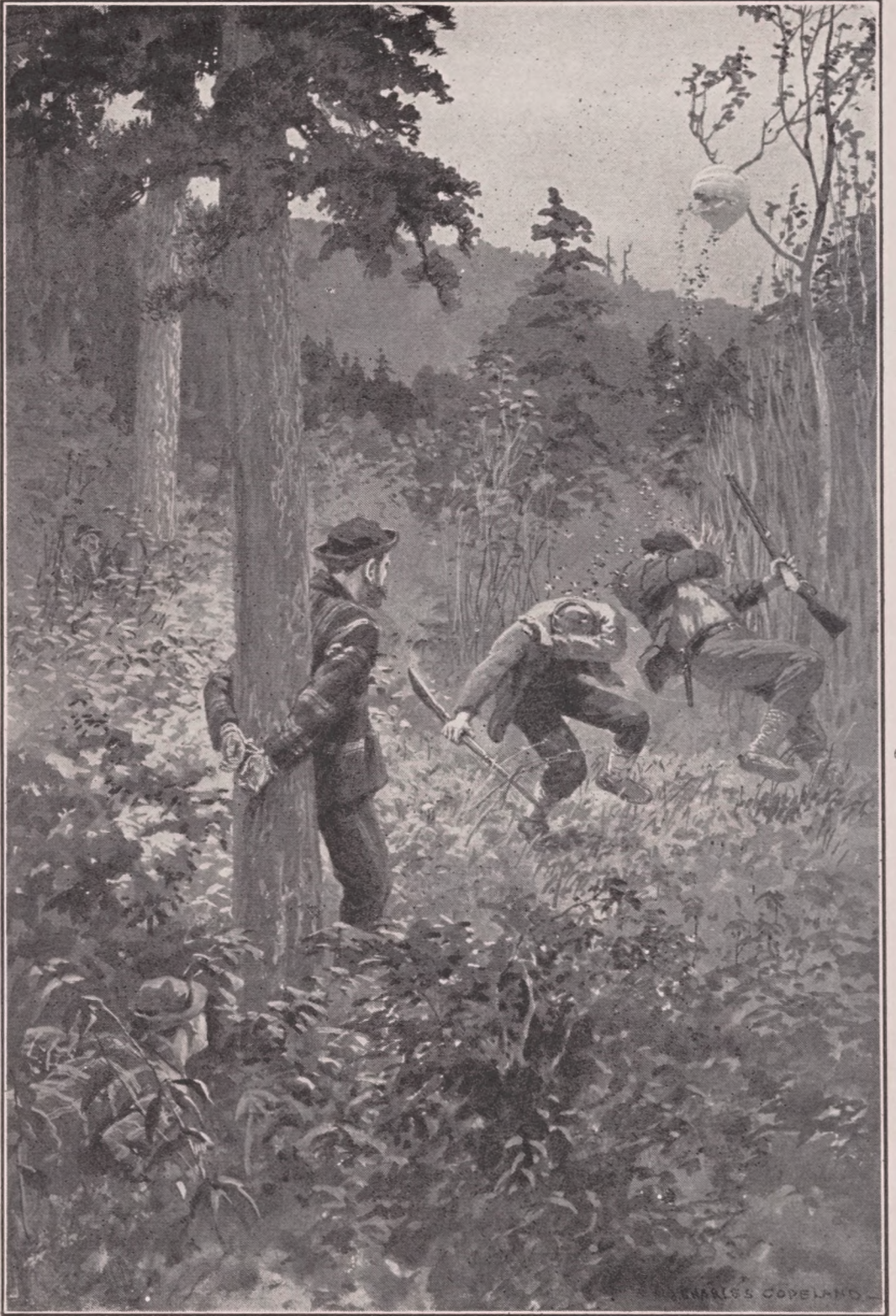












With a dull scream of rage and pain the two clawed  
frantically at their heads

*See page 359*



*FIRST VOLUME OF THE CAMP AND TRAIL SERIES*

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# THE YOUNG TIMBER- CRUISERS

OR

## FIGHTING THE SPRUCE PIRATES

BY

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*Illustrated by*

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No. 1



TO MY DEAR SON

HUGH

WHO WANTED ME TO WRITE  
A BOY'S BOOK THIS SERIES IS  
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED







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**THE YOUNG TIMBER-CRUISERS**

*OR*

**FIGHTING THE SPRUCE PIRATES**







# The Young Timber-Cruisers

## CHAPTER ONE

### IN SEARCH OF WORK

THE youth in the road paused and listened intently. He was tall and thin, almost emaciated in appearance, and stood with shoulders stooped as if weary. But it was not fatigue that caused him to stay his steps and cock an ear curiously. What he had heard was the whine of a cross-cut saw, eating its way through a log. But all the wood sounds were new to him and as yet he could interpret none of them. Again the saw voiced a shrill complaint tinged with a note of anger at encountering a stubborn knot, and the youth left the rough road and awkwardly made his way through the alders.

He beheld two men operating the saw, only to his unpractised eye it seemed as if the smaller of the two were trying to prevent the other from obtaining possession of the notched steel blade.

Instantly his sympathy was aroused; he resented the unequal odds.



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“Hi, you big fellow, quit that,” he called out, straightening his shoulders and briskly approaching..

“Bon jour,” cheerfully saluted the man addressed, turning to face the newcomer, but not releasing his hold on the saw.

“You needn’t ‘good morning’ me,” returned the youth. “But if the little fellow wants that saw you let him have it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

The man grinned blankly, not understanding the command. Then he faced his companion and gave the saw a violent yank. The little man frowned and squaring his jaw pulled the handle for the return stroke. Like his companion he understood no English. Unlike his companion he was of a sullen temperament. Both knew they were there to saw the log and must waste no time on strangers. As they tugged and strained the good-natured light faded from the big man’s eyes, and with compressed lips he sought to keep up with the pace set by his mate, who despite his slender physique could tire out many a larger man.

The youth, already out of temper because of the hardships of the day, buttoned his coat to the chin, while his blue eyes kindled into little fires.



“Will you stop it?” he growled, advancing yet nearer.

The big Frenchman turned his head, but did not desist in his endeavor to take the saw as fast as his companion forced the stroke upon him. His face, also, in reflecting the physical strain under which he was laboring, impressed the youth as being distorted with malice.

“For the last time,” cautioned the youth; “quit it.”

Believing he was being praised by the stranger, he bared his teeth and with a hissing sound increased the pace.

The youth hesitated no longer, but with an inarticulate cry sprang forward and caught the brawny shoulder and whirled the man about. The Frenchman instinctively clasped his assailant in a bear-like embrace, while the latter attempted to clutch the brown neck.

“Here! here! Hi! break away!” screamed a shrill voice, and the poorly matched combatants paused in their struggle and remained in a rigid pose as a short, stocky built youth made towards them, clearing logs and stumps and rocks with marvelous agility.

Then seizing the interlocked arms he pushed between them. He first addressed himself to the Frenchman, jabbering at him angrily. The



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Frenchman flung out his hands and with equal rapidity explained the situation insofar as he understood it. The little man, with clouded brow, remained at his end of the saw, seemingly not interested in the scene.

"Say, what do you mean by jumping Big Louey in this way?" demanded the last comer of the pugnacious stranger.

"He lays the blame on me, eh?" panted the youth. "I don't understand his lingo."

"'Course he blames you. It's his place to be working here. It isn't your place to be here at all. What do you mean by trespassing on the company's land and picking up rows with innocent workmen?"

"I don't care what he told you," answered the stranger, now more composed. "I am in the habit of telling the truth. I was passing along the road and heard a noise. I came here and found this big, hulking fellow trying to take this instrument from the little fellow. I told him to quit it, and let the little man alone. He paid no attention to my orders and I pitched into him. Now, what are you going to do about it? I can't fight two of you; I'm not a fighter, anyway. But I'll not stand by and see a small man abused by an overgrown bully."



The stocky youth stared wide-eyed for nearly a minute; then with a sobbing cry of mirth he fell to the ground and rolled back and forth.

“O dear! O dear!” he cried between wild peals of laughter. “Can it be real! O you’ve killed me! Thought they was fighting over the saw! Ha! ha! ha!”

“Seems to strike you as being funny,” growled the stranger.

“Please don’t say any more just yet, or you’ll kill me, sure,” gasped the other. “I—I never expected a treat like this. I—I don’t mean to offend you, but—ha! ha! ha!”

“I hope you have your laugh out,” said the stranger. “It seems I have made some kind of a mistake and I’ll be going.”

“Wait, wait. I’m better now,” said the merry one, staggering to his feet. “What did you think these men were doing? Fighting over the saw?”

“Certainly,” stiffly replied the stranger, turning to go.

“But hold on; don’t get huffy. Let me explain to Big Louey.” And facing the now grinning giant he quickly explained to him the cause of the attack. Then he continued to the



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stranger, "These men are sawing a log. The little fellow was crowding Louey pretty hard. They are great chums. I guess you don't know much about lumbering."

The stranger flushed to his ears. "Tell your Louey I am sorry to have misunderstood the situation, and give him this." The "this" was a silver dollar. "And tell him I sincerely hope I did not hurt him."

The stocky one gave way to a new burst of merriment, unable to speak for a moment. "He—he thanks you for the doller," he finally managed to inform; "and he says you didn't hurt him enough to make him take his bed. You hurt French Louey, Big Louey, Fighting Louey—the best natured giant that ever licked a whole drive of loggers into shape! Why, for a doller'n a quarter he'd let you punch him for three days and he'd never raise a hand. If he'd just closed those arms of his he'd broke every rib in your body. Lucky for you he's good-natured."

"I thank you for your information. I'll be going now."

"Say, you don't talk like me. You're city bred, I guess."

"I have lived much in the city, yes. Good-day."



“But, hold your hosses for a second. Where are you bound for?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where were you going when you started to reform Louey?”

“I was looking for work and food.”

“I see,” mused the other, now grave of face. “You look as if you were about played out.”

“I am faint from walking and fasting.”

“Well, why don’t you rest and eat?”

“I have no money to buy food with.”

“Huh! well, well. Gave your last doller to Lcuey, eh?” admired the other. “I’ll go back and get it.”

“No you won’t,” growled the stranger, seizing his arm and pulling him into the road.

“Men in my family don’t give and take back.”

“I see. What’s your name?”

“Stanley Malcolm.”

“Would you mind if I called you Splinter for short?”

“I certainly should,” cried Stanley.

“All right; I won’t, then. My name is Thomas, Bub Thomas, and the men at the mills will call you Reddy, or Rusty, as sure as you are born. Your hair is a reddish brown, you know.”

“My hair is my own and as for your men at



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the mills they'll have no chance to make sport of me."

"Dear! dear! how proper we be. Now, don't git mad; it uses up your nerve force. Let's git down to business. You want a job?"

"Certainly," moodily replied Stanley. "But I can see there is no chance for me up here. I'll go back to Errol and try to earn my way to Boston. I was a fool to have left the city."

"Don't git faint hearted. It's because you want some grub. We'll have that mighty soon. Thank the Lawd one can eat up here without paying, if it is simply a case of tough luck. As to work, you don't know but what a job is waiting for you this minute."

"I tried for work down below here at a big mill, but was not successful," said Stanley dispiritedly.

"I see; called into the paper mill, eh? Queer you couldn't fit in; they usually need a boy."

"A boy! I am sixteen, if you please," corrected Stanley.

Bub eyed him humorously. "So am I," he informed, "but we rank as younkers up here. Say, if you git something to eat won't it sort of soften that fiery temper of yours? Tempery,



peppery people don't git on very well up here. Shouldn't think they would in the city."

"I suppose not," wearily conceded Stanley; "but this is all new to me and I've had a tough time this last week."

"Well, well," soothed Bub, studying his companion with new interest; "let's cheer up. Your Uncle Thomas is going to take you in hand. But it's mighty queer about the paper mill. Did you git huffy? Did you talk high-falutin with the boss?"

"I talked with no one," replied Stanley coldly.

Bub's eyes opened very wide, and he halted and faced the other in amazement. "Let's git this straight. How did you know you couldn't git a job if you didn't ask for one?"

"I looked in the doors and saw that all the men were loafing. I knew there would be no work for me when the help had nothing to do. Even the big wheels in the engine room were idle."

Bub's facial expression first alarmed and then angered Stanley. For beginning with a strained, swollen look that puffed out the cheeks and made the dark eyes to fill with tears, it finally exploded in a shriek of laughter. "O my poor child! If you only knew how green



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you are! I shall never live to git to the mills. Men and wheels idle! Ha! ha! ha!”

“Your way lays up the road; I’ll return to Errol,” gritted Stanley, wheeling about.

“But don’t you see!” cried Bub, wiping his eyes and striving to sober his expression. “The—the men in a paper mill are always loafing when things go right. When you see ’em hustling and bustling about you can bet the company is losing money, ’cause something has gone wrong. But when they loll back and take it easy everything is going all hunkey dory. And—and you thought—ha! ha! There! I’ll laff no more. And the wheels were still! Ha! ha! ha! Don’t, please don’t leave me. I’ll quit; honest I will, but if you only knew how funny it is. Wheels stopped. Ha! ha! ha!”

“What is there funny about idle engine wheels?” demanded Stanley, now thoroughly irritated.

“They—they was using water power and saving seventy-five dollars a day,” feebly explained Bub. “If they could have water power the year ’round it would be a gold mine. Later, when the streams narrow up, they’ll have to use them wheels you saw idle and it’ll cost them seventy-five dollars for each day. Now, Stan, we’re friends again. You know I’m go-



ing to like you awfully; for if you're green up here you know I'd be green in the city."

"Yes, that's probably so," agreed Stanley, now mollified. "Most people are a bit green on their first trip to town. I was brought up there."

"And what did you do?"

"Er—why, I haven't done much of anything." And Stanley's voice and bearing were confused, Bub shrewdly observed.

"Hm," muttered Bub; "never met a feller before but what could do something."

"I've been to school and believe there are many things I could do if I had a chance to learn," continued Stanley, earnestly.

"I see," dryly commented Bub. "Well, we'll have a talk with Mr. Hatton. That is, I'll tell him you want a job. He'll say 'yes' or 'no,' and that will end it."

For about half a mile the two walked along in silence, Bub often stealing a compassionate glance at his foot-sore companion. The wind soughing through the pines came pleasantly to his ears, pricked through now and then with the tuneful call of a blue bird; but Stanley, with knit brows heeded nothing beyond the rough road before him.

"Here's the mills," finally announced Bub.



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Stanley halted and raised his eyes. Before him was a collection of long buildings and small mountains of sawdust, while the soft spring breeze brought to his nostrils the aroma of the lumber.

“Them two over there are the sawmills. Next is the pulp mill, the brick one, and across the way are the three boarding houses and the company’s store and offices,” explained Bub, a proud note in his voice as he remembered he was a part of the busy industry.

“What’s the name of the company?” idly asked Stanley.

“Great Scott! but you are a cool one,” admired Bub. “Here you’ve come way up here to git a job, have given your last dollar to Frenchy, and you don’t even know the name of the Great Northern Lumber and Paper company.”

“I’ve heard the name several times,” puzzled Stanley, frowning as he attempted to recall when and where.

“You have!” jeered Bub. “That’s mighty nice of you. Why, don’t you know we are the biggest thing in the lumber and paper game and that we cut, all told, more’n four hundred million a year?”

“Of what?” innocently inquired Stanley.



“Stan, you’re a wonder!” gasped Bub, throwing up his hands in dismay. “Millions of feet of lumber, greeny. That first mill over there eats four hundred cords of spruce a day. That’s some eating, ain’t it? And if it ain’t fed to the top-notch you’ll hear something drop. Then we own the paper mill down where you tried to git work. Ha! ha!”

“Who is ‘we’? Are you a part of the company?” sneered Stanley, resenting the other’s reference.

“Sure,” stoutly replied Bub. “The company would have to close up shop if I wasn’t here to help old Abner Whitten on his trips.”

“And I suppose that that tramp coming along the road, the one who looks more unfortunate than I, also is one of the company,” ironically remarked Stanley, pointing to the slouching figure of a man.

Bub’s eyes danced gleefully. “That is Wilson, our buyer. The company pays him ten thousand dollars a year. He knows the lumber game and the timber lands of New England and Canada as no other man knows it. Stanley, remember this; clothes don’t cut much of a figure up here. The only thing that counts is results. If you deliver the lumber you git the



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money and a dude isn't worth forty cents a week."

Stanley did not reply; he was humbled. For the first time he realized how utterly unlikely he was to fit in with this environment. Even French Louey was of more value than he. And as he pondered on this bitter truth his heart sank and a feeling of homesickness flooded his soul and the tears trembled in his eyes.

But Bub saw his emotion and his generous spirit urged him to find some diversion, something to distract his companion's thoughts. Nearby, leaning against a pile of fresh spruce bolts, was a swarthy complexioned man, whose hair grew coarse, black and long. It was Big Nick, the half-breed, who had lost his license as a guide for poaching. He had been discovered trapping beaver out of season and for this summer at least he could not hire out to any party at three dollars a day. He had blamed the lumber company, believing Hatton had set the game wardens on his trail. He had come down to the settlement to interview the manager and ask him to have the license restored; for Hatton was a power in that section and the half-breed believed he had ample power to reverse the action of the officials. Hatton had



refused to see him and he was in no frame of mind for jest.

But Bub in his desire to arouse his companion did not hesitate to make use of Nick, and in a tantalizing treble sang out,

“Beaver, beaver, taking a nap,  
Big Nick caught him in a trap,  
Then came—”

But before the crude taunt could be completed the half-breed was galvanized into action, and with a guttural oath leaped towards the boy, with one bronzed fist drawn back for a smashing blow.

Bub's face blanched and he jumped aside, tripped and fell. Instantly the infuriated guide was over him, one foot raised to stamp down into the upturned, terrified face.

Then the guide shot backward, and Stanley, who had stood as if petrified, beheld Wilson, the buyer, standing over the fallen boy.

“Want any more?” he muttered.

The guide crawled to his feet, one hand stealing to his belt.

“Drop it! Touch that knife and I'll shoot you,” warned Wilson in a low, metallic voice.

Without a word Big Nick faced about and hurried away. Then Wilson caught Bub by the collar, not only to lift him to his feet, but



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also to thoroughly shake him. "You young pup!" he upbraided. "What do you mean by trying to cut up with that Injun? Don't you know he's poison and would kill you as quickly as he would a mink? If you keep on with your smart Alec tricks you'll stop growing quick some of these days."

"I thank you very much, Mister Wilson," humbly returned Bub.

"You'd better, but that doesn't fill the bill. That Injun is now doubly sore on the company. If ever he gits you in the woods he'll even up what he believes he owes you. But that ain't the worst." And the buyer dropped his chin and ruminated gloomily.

"Why, what worse can he do?" whispered Bub, his voice trembling as he fancied a meeting with Big Nick in the woods, where each man was a law unto himself.

"He'll make a campaign against the company. He'll start fires," growled Wilson. "You young pup, it would almost be better if I'd let him smashed you. Now, get back where you belong."

As Bub led the way to the small office he was much crestfallen. His step lagged and the light faded from his gaze.

"I'm sticking by you, Bub. Where you go



I'll go, and perhaps the two of us will be enough for the Indian," murmured Stanley.

"You're a good sort and we're going to hitch up fine," ruefully replied Bub. "And let this be a lesson to you, young man; it's possible for a feller to be green even after he thinks he knows the ways of the woods and mills. What a greeny I was!"



## CHAPTER TWO

### STANLEY'S FIRST JOB

BUB's remarks as they drew near the office were half inaudible because of the increased clamor pouring out of the mill. A hasty glance sufficed for Bub to know the manager was in one of the mills, or at the sorting gaps.

"We'll try in here," he shouted in Stanley's ear. "Sawing pine into lumber. I tell you, my son, we are the only people and you must git in with us."

Stanley smiled gloomily; at another time he knew Bub would be a continuous source of delight to him, but now the future was veiled in doubts and misgivings. It was too late to retreat, however, for with his last optimistic observation Bub had led the way into the place of noise. The songs of the saws were keyed from droning monotonies to the shrill screech that seemed to split the ear. Added to this vibrating babel was the clang and roar of pulleys and belts and the racket of the boards sliding from the tables. For the fraction of a moment Stanley forgot their errand and with



mouth agape and eardrums singing, stared at the sawdust-covered men bending over and clustered around the discs of flashing steel. The Western sun in burnishing a huge circular saw into silver and gold was unable to reveal its motion. For all the world it was stationary and smooth of rim. And yet, when the huge log was urged upon the table and fed against its edge it divided like a cheese under the knife and only the intense scream of the long, hooked teeth evidenced that it was alive.

When Stanley turned to look for his new found friend he beheld Bub nearby, talking to a square built man, whose eyes were as cold and hard as the monster now severing the log. Although they were within a few feet of him Stanley could hear no word spoken. He saw the motion of Bub's lips and then knew the manager had uttered some monosyllable. Bub turned and gaining his side said something.

"Can't hear you," bellowed Stanley; nor could he hear his own words. Bub smiled and let him outdoors, but it was some seconds before the ringing left his ears and Bub's voice was very hollow and sounded far off as he informed:

"Good luck. You are to work in the kitchen helping the cook. You'll have to git to work



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at four o'clock in the morning and you'll get three dollars a week and your board. Not bad, eh?"

"Is that all?" asked Stanley, now thoroughly discouraged.

Bub misunderstood him and laughed merrily. "I don't wonder you think it is a cinch. I started in there at only two dollars a week, but I didn't have anyone to speak for me. I pulled your oar in great shape, my son. Besides helping the cook you'll have to carry water to the men, build the fires and so on. If you have any spare time you'll be sent to help with the hosses, of course."

"I didn't know anyone ever worked for three dollars," sighed Stanley.

"You didn't expect Wilson's place right off the reel, did you?" drawled Bub.

"No; but this kitchen work—what do I have to do?"

"Come up to my room, or rather our room, for you'll bunk with me, and I'll tell you," said Bub, leading the way.

Bub's room was in the middle boarding house and was not a large one. Still the owner seemed proud of it and pointing at the one chair and a small pine table, the latter covered with writing material and some old magazines, ex-



ulted, "There's style for you, my son. You're lucky in meeting up with me."

Stanley turned aside to conceal his dismay and in a choked voice asked, "And now as to my duties?"

"Build fires, put on the coppers, clean the kettles, pots and pans, peel potatoes—"

"Hold hard! Peeling potatoes is girl's work. I'll have none of it."

Bub sank on the bed, head in his hands, and moodily remarked, "I don't know as I can do anything for you after all. You're too finicky. What had you in mind, Mister Malcolm?"

"I certainly expected to get some clerical work, something more fitting," irritably returned Stanley.

"Very well, Mister Malcolm," politely observed Bub. "Please draw the chair up to the table and write as I talk. No, I mean it. We must find out where you are heavily wooded and blaze a trail to that place."

Stanley grimly seated himself and dipped the pen. "'Mister Bub Thomas, Esquire,'" began Bub, gravely.

"What nonsense is this?" cried Stanley, throwing down the pen.

"See here, Mister Malcolm, pick up that pen," growled Bub. "Think I'm spending my



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time up here for fun? 'Mister Malcolm, Esquire. My dear sir; although I ain't no particular ability and never worked I would like a nice job at a fat salary—' "

"I'll write no more," cried Stanley.

Bub reached over and picked up the paper and studied it thoughtfully; then he said, "I don't blame you. They wouldn't let you sharpen pencils in the office, and if you don't cut more of a figure peeling potatoes than you do slinging ink you'll say good-bye to the kitchen mighty quick. *I* can't git into the office, but I'm more shakes than you on writing. See here," and seizing the pen he rapidly copied Stanley's scrawling effort and presented for inspection a fair, clean bit of copy.

"Why, you write better than I do," sorrowfully admitted Stanley.

Blandly ignoring the compliment Bub assumed a paternal air and inquired, "What about arithmetic? Can you scale lumber, can you reckon stumpage? Or can you find a discount, the number of acres in a piece of land shaped like a lobster. I, myself, have gone only through plane geometry and the high school algebra. Of course Mister Malcolm is much farther advanced."

"No; I'm not," soberly corrected Stanley,



eying Bub with chagrin and respect. "I give in; you're ahead of me."

"Now we are improving and peeling potatoes don't look so black, eh?" cried Bub, kindly and encouraging again.

"You'll admit there isn't much of a future in that kind of work," said Stanley, smiling sadly.

"But when a man is down and out and has no money, nor grub, there's a supper and other suppers in it," reminded Bub. "Now, if you're keen to git ahead and are really ambitious, think I can fix it so you can git some washings to do outside of hours. The men pay twenty-five cents per wash. Ten of 'em a week would nearly double your income."

"Income!" sneered Stanley; then repentant, "Bub, you're a good fellow. I'll tackle the potatoes, but we'll leave the washings for the time being."

At this juncture a bell rang down below and Bub made a leap for the door. "Supper!" he cried, gaining the stairs in another bound.

"Won't there be enough?" asked Stanley, keeping up with him only by something of an exertion.

Bub's boyish laughter rang out clear and full, even rising above the warning of the bell



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and he slackened his steps. "Enough? Of course we have enough. Eat all you can hold, but we fellers git so all fired hungry we usually sprint for the dining room. Hear 'em outside! You'd think there was only a slice of bread and we'd got to fight for it. Follow me."

For the first time in his life Stanley beheld more than a hundred men eating in their shirt-sleeves, and eating as if life depended upon their finishing quickly. Only they didn't finish but helped themselves again and again. Mountains of baked beans, hills of doughnuts, seas of strong coffee, plateaus of gingerbread, foothills of fried potato vanished and were replaced, only to vanish again. And no one spoke, except to grunt a request for some particular dish. The rattle of the knives and forks, the clatter of the dishes, was a reproduction in miniature of the confusion in the mill.

"Pitch in," encouraged Bub, manfully wrestling the doughnuts from the expectant hand of a Prince Edwards Islander.

"I'm through," whispered Stanley, suddenly finding his appetite had fled.

"Jumping cats!" exclaimed Bub, pausing in amazement. "Off your feed as bad as that? I thought you was hungry."

"I was, but the noise, the sight of so much



food," mumbled Stanley. "Why don't they bring in what you order instead of putting everything on the table at once?"

"O my son, my son!" choked Bub, holding his sides. Then in a mincing voice, "Waiter, I will have a bit of a bean and a sprig of spruce—"

"Shut up!" snarled Stanley.

"Say, Red-head, shoot over them biscuit. Be ye deaf?" called out a black whiskered man across the table. Stanley's face reddened and he opened his mouth to resent the tone and language, but mastered himself and silently obeyed the rough request.

Bub nudged him and whispered, "That's better. I have some hopes for you. Remember, you are only a kitchen boy for the present. If you ain't got nerve enough to be that and be it right you'll never amount to shucks at anything else up here."

"Let's get out of here," was Stanley's answer.

Bub looked ruefully at his plate, recently refilled, but stifling a sigh rose and ushered his new friend, not to the outer air, but to the kitchen.

"You must meet the cook. He's your boss. Try and be pleasant. You won't disturb him



any if you're not, but he'll have a new kitchen boy."

Stanley heard this final bit of advice with a grimace, and Bub approaching a perspiring man stirring something in a kettle said, "This is your new boy, Cook."

"Git out of my way, or I'll scald ye," cried the cook, not raising his eyes from the kettle.

"He goes on to-morrow morning. I'll tell him what to do," continued Bub, in no way abashed.

"Out of this kitchen or I'll be the death of ye," bawled the cook.

"There! we've fixed that all right," enthusiastically cried Bub as they gained the open air. "You'd had a disagreeable time if I hadn't gone in to break the ice. When I began in there I didn't have a soul to speak a good word for me."

"And you call that a cordial welcome?" asked Stanley, his voice trembling.

Bub's eyes widened in surprise. "Did you expect him to throw his arms around you and kiss you?" he at last inquired.

Stanley was too depressed to resent the scorn in Bub's tone and he could only say, "Threatened to scald me!"

"But he didn't hurt you, did he? Words



don't break no bones or float logs. Why, my son, when you git use to it you'll go 'round feeling real lonely, when the cook stops jawing you." Then sagely, "You see, Stan, there never was a cook but what gits filled up with hot air from the cooking, and if he don't let off steam he'll bust, and then the whole settlement goes hungry. If you was over to Number One or Two you'd find either cook a heap worse'n this one."

"Are there more boarding houses?" faltered Stanley.

"Three of 'em. This is the best, though. The saw gangs live here and the teamsters. Over to One and Two you git the loggers and the foreigners. The loggers are all right, but they've blown their winter wages and their drive wages and they feel out of sorts. One of 'em threw a cup at me once and cut my head open."

"I'm tired. May I go to bed?" humbly asked Stanley.

"Sure. Of course you're tired; I ought to have remembered. Go ahead up and take either the front or back side of the bed. Most of the men have bunks, but we officers have to throw on style. I'll bring the alarm clock so you can git up in time."



"I don't know why you should bother, Bub," said Stanley, clasping the other's hand impulsively. "You know more'n I do."

"No, I don't," sorrowfully replied Bub. "I can't talk the lingo you can." Then with a blaze of optimism, "But, my son, if you're not fired I'll learn the trick from you. I talk rough, but watch my smoke. I'll pick it up. So long."

Stanley found the room as one in a dream. Not only was he worn out by physical hardships, but by gloomy thoughts. It all seemed so hopeless. A dozen Frenchmen now could have been abused in his sight and he would not offer to interfere. It was all so rough and hard. There was no single redeeming feature. Hold on—there was Bub. Bub was a true friend. He owed his supper and bed to Bub. Then with a flush of shame he remembered that this same uncouth Bub, with no advantages, was ahead of him in book knowledge. Accompanied by these disagreeable thoughts he fell asleep.

In a vague way Stanley knew four o'clock in the morning, was, at some seasons of the year, in the neighborhood of sunrise. He always had believed it to be an early hour, judging entirely from hearsay; but he never had appreciated just how early it was until Bub



shook him violently and commanded, "Git up! Turn out!"

"You just come to bed?" sleepily asked Stanley, preparing for another nap.

"Just come to bed! It's morning and time you was hoofing it downstairs. Want the cook to come up and git you? Better not have him, my son."

"But it's dark," remonstrated Stanley, his heart sinking at the loneliness of the hour.

"It'll be mighty hot if you ain't downstairs in two jumps," warned Bub. The note of earnestness in his voice had its effect on Stanley.

With a shiver the youth crawled from the warm blankets and fumbled for his clothes. He had never known that nights and mornings in late May could be so desolate and cold. The rawness of the early morning air bit to the bone. And to heighten his sense of isolation Bub snored softly as he cuddled luxuriously. And with his heart in his boots Stanley stole awkwardly down the stairs and out into the kitchen.

Here he found the cook's assistant, an Irishman named Gilvey. He was some four years older than Stanley, but ages ahead of him in importance.



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"Think this is a lawn party?" greeted Gilvey, icily. "Ye be late again, me lad, and ye'll answer to me."

"I thought the cook was my boss," defended Stanley.

"The cook is *my* boss, ye red-head," snarled Gilvey. "Think he has time to bother with bossing tramps? It's bad enough for me to have to be saddled with the dirty work. Now hump yerself. Start them fires."

With many blunders and under a liberal cursing Stanley worked through the early morning tasks. When breakfast was ready he found he could not sit down with Bub, but must work the harder in the kitchen. After the men had trooped away he was allowed to eat his meal in the corner. While he drank his coffee and tried to believe he had not been working for days Gilvey kept up a fire of coarse remarks. Lost in his somber meditations Stanley did not heed these at first. Then as he caught the insults and heard the cook chuckle an encouragement his blood boiled and he was about to rise from the table, when Gilvey's malice was given a new turn by the breezy entrance of Bub.

"Hi, my son. How goes the battle?" he greeted, running up and slapping Stanley on the shoulder.



"It's horrible," groaned Stanley, shaking his head. "Everyone is so cruel. The assistant has been abusing me fearfully. I won't stand it."

"Nonsense, man," brusquely returned Bub in a low voice. "He wants to bedevil you till he can git you mad. Keep smiling if you want to git even with him. As for me I ain't under his command and I'll touch him up a bit."

Saying this he walked down by Gilvey, who watched him suspiciously. As he reached the door he turned and cried out, "Say, Paddy, how much did you pay for stealing that last pig?"

With a terrible oath Gilvey seized a butcher knife and hurled it at the grinning face. The door slammed to and the knife sank deep into the plank, quivering back and forth. But if Bub intended to lighten his friend's spirits by this method he succeeded only in part. For once Gilvey had completed his arraignment of Bub he redoubled his persecutions of Stanley. He offered the youth no violence, but he sought in every way to provoke him into making an assault. When the water was brought in he declared it to be filled with dirt and with an oath told the weary lad to bring fresh. By this and other means he completely exhausted



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Stanley by the time the supper dishes and kettles were washed and set away.

That night, aching in every bone and thoroughly heart-sick, Stanley threw himself on the bed and for an hour or two would not be comforted. Finally he said, "It's no use, Bub. I can't stand it. I'd rather die of starvation than endure Gilvey's insults and abuse longer."

"And that would tickle Gilvey to death," cried Bub. "Can't you see he is trying to make you so mad you'll forgit and go at him. Then he'll have an excuse for polishing you off. He did that to the last feller."

"He is horrible. Sometimes to-day I felt like killing him."

"None of that," sharply warned Bub. "I ain't sharing my room with assassins. Gilvey is ignorant and a brute. If you say so I'll join you and we'll lick him. We could do it easy, only it wouldn't help you much. For the men would say I had to help you hoe your row."

"It's not to be thought of," quickly replied Stanley, reddening. "I'll fight my own battles in the kitchen. I'll keep on my guard and if he keeps his hands off me I'll let him be and let him talk."

"He won't touch you," assured Bub.



On the next morning Stanley progressed more rapidly with his work, but there was no surcease in Gilvey's abuse. It seemed to anger him that the youth made no mistakes this morning.

"Why haven't ye peeled that other kettle full of pertaties?" he finally demanded, a note of triumph in his voice. "Didn't ye hear me tell ye a dozen times?"

"Yes, I heard you," quietly responded Stanley, his form trembling.

"Why didn't ye do it then?" roared Gilvey, approaching, his eyes flashing.

"Because the cook told me you had made a mistake, and that I wasn't to peel them," politely replied Stanley, a cold little smile playing around his mouth as he faced Gilvey.

Infuriated at the smile Gilvey screamed an oath and flung himself upon the youth. The cook paused in amazement to see the two struggling. Before he could interfere the combatants whirled clear of the tables and fell with a heavy thud. When Stanley rose panting to his feet Gilvey remained motionless. From a cut in his head, received from the edge of a kettle, a thin stream of blood trickled across the floor Stanley had just washed.



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“You git out of here!” cried the cook, advancing threateningly.

“I’ll wait and see how badly he is hurt,” stoutly replied Stanley, now surprised to find himself no longer afraid. “Bring some water.”

The cook mechanically dipped into a pail and between them Gilvey soon regained his senses. Then with a new burst of rage the cook repeated, “You’re fired. Git! I’ll have no trouble-makers here.”

“I may be fired, as you say, but I am no trouble-maker. That man has abused me from the start. You have laughed at him and encouraged him. If either of us had been killed to-day the blood would have been on your head,” indignantly accused Stanley.

The cook lowered his tone, but lost none of his insistence, as he said, “You’re through. Git your time. Gilvey may have nagged you a bit too hard. I may have done wrong to laff, but the woods are full of chore boys, while a good second-man is hard to find, and harder to hold. So, git!”

“What’s the matter? Had a raise in pay?” cried Bub as Stanley found him cleaning three rifles back of the office. The query was occasioned by Stanley’s new bearing. He walked



more erect and his eye was clearer. The lines about his mouth had disappeared and there was almost the shadow of a smile on his face. "What's up? Money from home?" anxiously persisted Bub.

"No, I'm discharged," informed Stanley, dropping beside the rifles.

"Fired!" gasped Bub in dismay, rubbing his nose with an oily rag. "And I'd planned on we two having such good times. Fired! And to think you feel good over it." His voice was now one of reproach.

"I'm sorry I'm discharged," said Stanley, "but Gilvey will never abuse me again." And he hastened to relate his experience.

Bub's eyes blazed with joy as he listened and he threw his hands wildly about as Stanley reached the climax. "Hooray!" he softly bleated. "I love you for it. I'll git you a job on the loading gang. It'll break your back for a few days, but it's the only place you can work in after being fired. You see, McPherson hates Gilvey. Mac is the boss of the loaders. If I can hustle you down there before Hatton learns of the fracas you'll be let alone once Mac has hired you. Come, my warrior boy, let's hurry."



## CHAPTER THREE

### STANLEY WANTS A CHANGE

“Now, Sonny, you keep shut,” admonished McPherson as Bub began a voluble eulogy on his friend. “I guess this young man is big enough to do his own talking.” Then to Stanley, “What can you do?”

“I can work hard and do my best,” eagerly replied Stanley.

“That is a great deal, but not quite enough up here,” slowly informed McPherson, carefully whittling a chip of pine into a cube. “What you call working hard might strike us as being a pretty thin effort. Your hands don’t look as if they’d been used much.”

“But he just—” began Bub, excitedly, as he caught a glimpse of the stern faced Hatton approaching.

“Keep shut,” broke in McPherson, not unkindly. “Never see such a younker to talk. You ought to be a auctioneer. Now, young man,” this to Stanley, “I guess there’s nothing doing for you. What I need is men that can pile, load and unload lumber, toss pulp squares



about and keep at it between meals to the last second."

"If I can't do a man's work you can pay me a boy's pay," entreated Stanley. "Surely, my labor would be worth something."

"That's the boy of it; you don't examine into things. Only so many men can work around a lumber pile, or pass pulp squares into a car. You'd take up as much room as an able-bodied man without doing the man's work. It ain't what we call economy. If you had a hoss that could only pull a colt's load you'd not waste time by hitching him up with a real worker, eh? Of course not. Where've you been working?"

"In the kitchen," bitterly replied Stanley, his hopes now down to zero.

"Then I'd advise you to dig back to the kitchen," curtly said McPherson.

"But, Mister McPherson, he's had a row with Gilvey and has got the best of him and he can't go back there," exploded Bub, now in a frenzy to clinch the situation before Hatton could arrive.

"What! licked Gilvey," exclaimed McPherson, his eyes lighting.

"He assaulted me and I only defended myself and in the tussle he fell underneath and cut his head open," apologized Stanley.



“Licked Gilvey, eh?” murmured McPherson, his rugged features relaxing. “That feller makes poor coffee a purpose, just because he knows I’d rather have a good cup of coffee than the best meal ever cooked.” Then almost fiercely, “So that’s the way you start in to git a job, eh? You come in here and go a bullying and rowdying ’round and expect hard working bosses to find you work when your evil ways has kicked you out of a job. I’m ashamed to hear you confess it.” And McPherson frowned heavily on the disconsolate youth.

“I’m sorry to have troubled you. I had hoped to get a chance to earn my living,” said Stanley, hanging his head as he turned to walk away.

“What’s the matter with you?” sharply demanded McPherson. “Think I’m going to lug you around in my arms and hand your work to you? Why don’t you git busy?”

“You mean?” cried Stanley, his face illumined.

“I mean I’ll fire you if you don’t hustle down to that car and tell the feller with the whiskers you’re to help juggle pulp. Come, git a moving.” As the two delighted youths raced for the car McPherson softly repeated, “Licked Gilvey, eh? Well, well, who’d a



thought it. There must be something in the younker even if his hands is soft."

His soliloquy was interrupted by Hatton's harsh voice asking, "Who are those boys you were talking with?"

"Only Bub and a new feller I've hired for gang four," carelessly replied McPherson, yet eying the manager narrowly from the corner of his eye.

"You mean the chap the men call Red?" said Hatton, looking after the youths.

"I guess that's among his nicknames," easily returned McPherson.

"Take him off. Tell him to get his time. He half killed Gilvey. He can't work here."

McPherson's jaw squared and he closed his knife with a click. "Say, Mr. Hatton, who's the most importance 'round here? The cook's helper, or me?"

"Why, Mac, you're worth a million helpers," Hatton hastened to assure, detecting the danger signal in the Scotchman's grey eyes.

"All right; I want that younker in my gang. Of course you don't mind?"

Hatton smiled grimly at the politeness in McPherson's low voice. He knew his man to be one of the best bosses in the district and one who could be very stubborn in small things.



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"Of course not, Mac," he returned. "He's your man now and you're responsible for him."

"I'm starting him at six dollars a week," said McPherson.

"Very well; tell the time-keeper. Now give me the figures on last week's shipments of pulp. They're kicking hard down there and we must get more stuff through."

Stanley found his new job more to his taste although the first half-hour found him aching in every bone. There was no abuse, but the machine-like rapidity with which the men passed the large squares of wet pulp into the car, called for every ounce of muscle in his body. At the end of the first hour he believed he must stop and rest, or drop in his tracks; but the men showed no inclination to pause. Then he seemed to get his second wind. He ached in every joint and cord, but by clinching his teeth he discovered he could keep moving.

At last the man with the whiskers, who had immediate charge of the loading, turned to him and humorously remarked, "You like this light work, eh?"

"It's pretty tough, but it's good to have a try at a man's work," panted Stanley.

"Wal, you make a pretty good try. Now git up in the car and take your time seeing the



stuff is piled squarely," kindly directed the man.

In a few moments Stanley jumped down from the door and announced, "No use of me in there. Everything is squared up beautifully."

"Then git over on that pile of boards and keep tally till I call you," snapped the man.

Then Stanley appreciated that he had found a new friend, who was trying to find a way to allow him a breathing spell. His heart swelled with gratitude and for thirty minutes he enjoyed the luxury of complete relaxation.

"Hi! going to loaf all day?" bawled the man at last.

Stanley leaped to his feet, his eyes blazing his thanks, and with renewed zeal assailed the ever arriving squares of pulp.

That night he slept the sleep of the exhausted and did not have to go to work until seven o'clock in the morning. The next few days were a repetition of the first, only now his muscles began to harden and respond more quickly and less painfully to the call made upon them. Then he was shifted to the lumber gang and underwent new torture.

The boards were long and heavy and his hands filled with splinters until the boss



accosted him brusquely one day and concluded by giving him a pair of old gloves. He now found himself doing a man's work, indeed. And the man at the other end of the board never waited for him to get a grip on the lumber, but with head bowed threw his end onto the flat car. This often resulted in a benumbing jar to Stanley's whole frame as one end of the heavy timber fell on the car while the other end was in his hands. But he asked no quarter and pluckily stuck to his task.

Bub had been away from the settlement for several days and it was with genuine pleasure that Stanley limped to his room one night and found the good-natured youth sitting on the bed.

"Well, my son; how goes things?" cried out Bub, jumping to his feet and warmly clasping the other's hand. "Licked any more people?"

"Bub, I never knew I could be so glad to see anyone as I am to see you," earnestly replied Stanley.

Bub's face burned red with pleasure, although he said, "O stop your kidding. Anyone abusing you? If Whiskers bears down on you just let me know and I'll have a talk with him."

For the first time since his arrival at the



mills Stanley laughed aloud. "You're the queerest chap I ever met, Bub," he said. "No, Mr. White—please don't call him Whiskers—has treated me mighty well. He's rough as a bear, but he's good to me. Where've you been?"

"O trotting 'round with Abner Whitten, our best timber cruiser. He's a sort of cousin to my father and I work with him. In winter time he's the walking boss and goes all up through the region north of the Rangeleys, visiting camp after camp, crosses over to the Kennebec Valley and on up to the West Branch of the Penobscot. I tell you that man knows his business."

Stanley's eyes glistened. "I wish he'd let me go with you. That's the kind of life I'd like; free and easy and out in the open."

Bub smothered a smile and assured, "My son, if you are looking for a snap don't take to cruising. It may read pretty in books, but did you ever carry seventy-five pounds of grub and equipment through an overgrown tote road? It's no picnic."

"I can do it," promptly declared Stanley. "Mr. White says I can do almost as well as a man on the loading gang."



“Then why don’t you want to stick to it?” asked Bub, a bit suspicious.

Stanley threw out his hands passionately as he explained, “I’m not over-conceited, Bub, but that loading job is tiresome. It isn’t the hard work, but I owe it to my intelligence to get something better. We are nothing but cogs in a machine, lumber and pulp, pulp and lumber, day in and day out. I could do it just as well, perhaps better, if I didn’t know how to read or write. Why, they train elephants in India to pile lumber. Now I want a chance where I can think a bit.”

“Why don’t you think while loading? Did you ever stop to think how the boards you pile were cut way up north; how they were sent down the river, towed across lakes, sluiced from one lake to another, hauled against the current between lakes by endless chains, and at last how the cedar is cut into shingles, pine into lumber and clapboards, how fir, spruce and poplar goes into pulp, only we don’t handle much of the last, if any. Did you ever stop to think of the money spent and the lives lost before you can get a job tossing lumber?”

“No; I never thought of it before because I am green,” soberly replied Stanley. “But now you’ve set me thinking I am all the more



anxious to go with you and see the work at the beginning. Wouldn't you like to have me along, Bub?"

The note of entreaty affected Bub keenly and he cried, "I'd be awfully pleased if you was one of us. But, honest, Stanley, Ab Whitten is a most peculiar man and he'd never consent, or I would have asked him before this."

Stanley's face became downcast. "When do you start?" he asked.

Bub dropped his eyes and tried to speak indifferently as he replied, "To-morrow."

"So soon," sighed Stanley. "Where are you bound for?"

Bub's eyes brightened as he replied, "I don't know, but it's something big. We're taking three rifles and Hatton wants to see Abner to-night for a last talk. I suspect that Jim Nace and his gang has been up to something pretty stiff."

"Who's Nace?" inquired Stanley, now deeply interested at the hint of a hazardous undertaking.

"He's the worst timber pirate in the State. He's not satisfied with letting out jobs to small operators and then beating 'em out of their money, but it's believed he's stolen millions of spruce and pine during the last thirty



years. Of course we wouldn't mix up with him if he hadn't robbed the company in some way. I tell you, Stan, it's going to be exciting before we return. We're to push right through to Kennebago river and outfit there. The company has wangans all up through, even beyond Parmachena lake and east along the Dead river."

"The company has what there?" asked Stanley, looking much puzzled.

"Wangans, Mister Malcolm. A wangan is a store-house, where they keep the equipment. You can git blankets, blue and red shirts, trousers, heavy woolen cloth coats called Mackinaws—they look like a hoss-blanket and have a belt, made in colors that are very giddy—and then there are pontiacs, or single breasted woolen coats. Then there is tobacco and liniment. You never see so much tobacco and liniment as is used in the woods. The loggers are strong on both. Then there are mittens, leggings; in short, everything a man would need in the woods."

"That's where I want to go," repeated Stanley, his very eyes wistful. "I can't learn anything piling lumber."

"No?" sweetly said Bub. "Let's see; you've been handling spruce. Do you know how many



spruce logs was necessary to scale a thousand feet?"

Stanley shook his head and looked blank.

"It wouldn't have hurt you to have asked," suggested Bub, his eyes twinkling.

"Well, I ask now," humbly said Stanley.

Bub threw out his chest importantly and carelessly explained, "From ten to a dozen. In the old days it wouldn't take more'n half of that number. Did you know a fir looks like a spruce, only has a smoother bark and when growing shows a little lighter shade of green? I thought so. Did you know a pine'll stand more heat than any other tree up here and will live when other trees are killed by fire? Dear! dear! Did you know a spruce takes about seventy-five years to get a six-inch diameter at breast height? And that if not cut down will live two or three hundred years?"

"I know none of these things," sadly replied Stanley.

"I'll give you an easy one," kindly encouraged Bub. "We had a boom break on the lake yesterday. Now which would you prefer, to have a boom of logs break on a calm day or a windy day?"

"On a calm day," promptly answered Stanley, recovering some of his composure.



Bub grinned. "Wrong again. On a calm day they scatter in all directions and if the lake is a big one it ain't hardly worth while to pick 'em up. On a windy day they drive ashore in a bunch and are sure to fetch up somewhere. On a calm day there seems to be an undertow, and it's amazing how quickly they'll scatter in all directions."

"I admit I'm ignorant," said Stanley; "but that's all the more reason why I should go with you and have you tell me things. I can't keep asking the men here as the most of them will only swear at me."

Bub pursed up his lips thoughtfully. "It would be lots of fun to have you along and I'm willing to ask Abner. We'll find him now; only, don't git your hopes up. You stand about as much chance as you would to git Hatton's job. We've got to travel fast, cruise several cants along Mt. Jim, besides obeying important orders which I ain't found out about as yet."

Stanley moved to the door. "Let's waste no time in finding him. I'll work for my board."

"If you offer to do that he wouldn't take you," smiled Bub. "And again, we must wait till he's had his supper. He'd refuse anything before he's had his meal. Abner is the greatest man for thinking about his food that you



ever saw. Wait a minute, so's we'll be sure he's finished."

Abner Whitten was a most eccentric man. He lived in two hobbies: loyalty to his employers and worry about food supplies. Yet he was not what the men called a "heavy feeder." A stranger to hear him talk would believe he was a glutton or was perpetually being starved to death, while in truth he ate but little. The greater part of his life had been spent in the woods and Bub had not exaggerated his value as a timber cruiser and "walking-boss." When new lands were to be opened up it was Abner who was sent to spy out the situation. In the operating season, or during the winter months, he passed on snowshoes and on tote teams from camp to camp, keeping a general supervision over a thousand and one details pertaining to the various crews.

While the youths were waiting for him to eat his fill he had finished his evening meal and proceeded to the office, where Hatton awaited him.

"You start to-morrow?" greeted Hatton, speaking nervously.

Abner nodded and seated himself on the edge of a table, swinging one leg as he waited for his superior to continue.

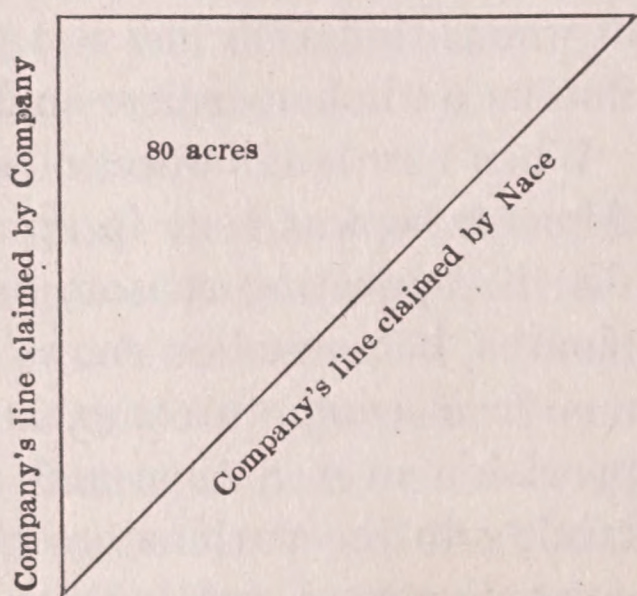


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“Who do you take?”

“Noisy Charlie and the boy, Bub,” replied Abner.

“Very well; here is the copy of the old and new lines. Unless we can prove our boundary, as we know it was run out in 1800, the Nace outfit will skin us to the tune of more than one hundred thousand dollars.” And Hatton handed over a paper which revealed the following:



“Of course they’ve done everything to conceal the old monuments,” muttered Abner, intently studying the triangle which the company was in danger of losing.

“Yes; our surveyors were unable to find anything to warrant our contention. On the other hand they say the markings on the beech,



along the line claimed by Nace, has every appearance of being genuine. The surveyor's private mark, two circles linked and crossed by an arrow, is there, as well as the initials of the original owners."

"They've got us unless the unexpected turns up," said Abner, simply, turning the paper over and over in his hands. "Nace is too good a politician to buck up against us in the courts unless he's sure his line will stand law."

"He may have us, but he is a scoundrel and anything he's in is usually rotten at the core. Now I am positive that he is swindling us out of eighty acres of the best spruce timber in the State and I'm sending you up there to prove that fact." And Hatton's iron jaws clicked loudly.

"I'll do everything I can," simply replied Abner, rising to go. "I suppose I'd better cruise Mt. Jim on the way up so's not to excite any suspicion."

"Sure; and don't let even the guide know your destination till you're most there," added Hatton.

"I understand; I'm not much of a talker," reminded Abner, walking to the door.

He was still deep in thought when Stanley



and Bub accosted him. At first he did not sense their presence and when they repeated their salutation he waved them aside impatiently and with bowed head walked slowly towards the edge of the settlement. He knew he was approaching a crisis in his affairs. He had been on many ventures for the company, had made many cruises, had managed many camps, and never yet had failed to show the expected results. But now there seemed small chance for success. He knew that Nace must be extremely confident to invite a litigation from so powerful a rival. If the line had been changed it must have been changed fully a score of years before, or when Nace was beginning his career as an operator. Abner could not but help admiring the forethought that prompted the swindle.

“To think of his shifting that line and then waiting twenty years before trying to turn the trick,” he muttered, half aloud.

“Could we speak to you, Mister Whitten?” politely repeated Bub for the fifth time.

“What do ye want?” suspiciously asked Abner. “When ye come snooping ’round and a mistering me I know something is up. Have ye seen to the food for to-morrer?”

“Yes, sir; I’ve put in three tins of that



sliced ham you like so well," eagerly assured Bub.

"Three tins, eh?" pondered Abner. Then quickly, "Make it six; we might git stalled somewhere for a day or so. If we make the Kennebago day after to-morrer it won't have done any harm to have the extry tins along. Kind of look over Charlie's packs and see if he's got enough of everything. Then—but who have we here?" And he glanced keenly at Stanley.

"He's a friend of mine," informed Bub, trying to speak in an unconcerned voice.

"Uh! Didn't know ye had any friends. Prob'ly as wurthless as ye be," grunted Abner.

"Abner, you are the only best friend I have," smiled Bub. "You know it and it's no use playing the bear with me."

"Well, well; what do ye want?" snapped Abner, but not displeased with Bub.

"I want you to take Stanley along with us. He's a good worker and will help us more'n he'll hinder us and—"

"Stop it!" roared Abner, waving his hands. "What do ye mean by trying to force help onto me? Of course he can't go. He'd eat more'n a dozen men, to begin with. Didn't



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I see him feeding the first night he was here?"

"At that time he was half starved; he doesn't eat much now," defended Bub.

"It's no use; quit talking," grumbled Abner. "I've seen too many of them thin, scrawny fellers not to know a big feeder when I see one. It ain't no place to be took starving up in the woods. Besides, I don't need anyone else."

"Bub told me he knew you wouldn't take me," spoke up Stanley, "but I urged him to ask you, as I awfully wanted to make the trip."

"Do ye know the woods?" asked Abner, veiling a sarcastic gleam in his shrewd eyes.

"I've camped out quite a few times," eagerly replied Stanley.

"I see," sniffed Abner. "Drank spring water out of fancy drinking cups and thought ye was roughin' it, eh? If ye was dying of thirst in the woods and see a loon flying above ye and had a gun, what would ye do?"

"I'd shoot the loon," promptly replied Stanley, bracing back his shoulders as he became more confident.

Bub's groan told him, however, that he had erred, even before Abner exploded, "Ye would, would ye? Wal, I thought so. Ye'd make a



woodsman in about seventeen million years. What'd ye shoot the loon for? Did he ever do ye any harm?"

"I thought one could drink his blood," ventured Stanley, trying to get his cue from Bub's worried face.

"Ye two just scat! Clear out! I want to think," commanded Abner, giving them his back.

"For mercy's sake, Stan, what made you say anything so idiotic as that," complained Bub, as they walked back to the boarding house.

"What should I have said?" cried Stanley, now thoroughly exasperated. "Try to tame the loon, tie a message to his leg? Why did he bring in the gun if he didn't mean for me to shoot?"

"He was just trying you," sadly explained Bub. "Of course, if you knew the A B C about the woods you'd know the loon was pointing for water. That's what you should have said. And you should have added that while following that course you'd keep your eye peeled for the Indian cucumber plant, so's to dig up one and stop your thirst. It's no use for me to try to describe it to you—"

"Not a bit," interrupted Stanley. "It'll be much better to wait and show me one."



“You’d have to go into the woods for me to do that,” said Bub. “I shan’t have time till after this trip.”

“Oh, yes, you will; you’ll show me lots of them during the trip. I’m going with you, you know,” smiled Stanley.

“How?” gasped Bub.

“I don’t know, unless I walk. But I’m going,” cried Stanley. “I’ve been bossed about and swore at and now I’m going to see the woods. And Mr. Whitten must include me in his party. I don’t know just how it is to be worked, Bub, but it’s going to be worked just the same. What time do you start to-morrow?”

“A little after the noon hour. The gas boat takes us across Umbagog lake to Rapid river. We shall push right through to the north of Kennebago lake,” explained Bub.

“All right. I shall be with you,” promised Stanley.

“I snum! but that feller’s got nerve,” admired Bub, as Stanley swung away. “He almost makes me believe he can do it. He’s a good feller and I must try to learn to talk as he does.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

### OFF FOR THE WOODS

DESPITE his promise to Bub, Stanley had but a hazy idea how he was to overcome Abner's opposition and participate in the trip north. When he went to sleep he had only planned to steal away and follow the party till they got far on their way and then boldly join them. When he awoke in the morning he remembered that much of the trip would be made by water and he realized there would be hardly a possibility of his crossing Umbagog lake, following Rapid river, conquering the long stretches of Molechunkamunk and Mooselucmaguntic lakes in the Rangeley chain and arriving at the mouth of the Kennebago river in time to keep abreast of the cruisers. Too proud to confess defeat to the still sleeping Bub, he quietly rose and stole down stairs.

He had begun with the loading gang with much elation; now he loathed it all. But how to win Abner's consent? Long and hard he weighed this problem, his gaze vacantly fixed on the North. The woods and waters up there



seemed to call him in every murmur of the scattered pines near the edge of the settlement. He had yet to learn that these solitary monarchs were left undisturbed because they were already doomed by "red rot," or cancer, and were unfit for lumber. He only knew the gentle song sung by their boughs was pleading with him to penetrate the fastness of the big woods and seldom-visited streams and lakes.

"If I only knew a little of what Bub knows," he regretted. This in itself was a goodly sign, for by temperament Stanley was inclined to be overbearing.

Then the bell summoned him to breakfast. He ate scarcely anything, but did not know that Abner had observed his lack of appetite and had applauded it. Nor did he attempt to engage the cruiser in conversation, being now convinced that all entreaty would be useless. As a result he entered upon his dreary task sore at heart and oblivious of all about him.

"Say, Rusty," broke in White, the boss, "could you find it convenient to wake up and do as told?"

"I beg pardon, Mr. White, I fear my poor wits were wool-gathering," confessed Stanley.

"All right; you're honest, anyway," chuckled White. "Run down to the mill and ask Mc-



Pherson if I'm to keep on with the lumber. And, say, don't run, walk. Take your time." The last was occasioned by the tired look about the youth's eyes. The boss interpreted his haggard expression as being the result of physical exhaustion.

Stanley bowed and hastened to the mill. As he entered he was sorry to see Abner and Bub talking with Hatton. The sight of his roommate recalled to his mind what he must miss, and for the moment he was selfish enough to envy the happy faced fellow. Then, ashamed of this selfish emotion, he turned to leave and was only restrained by a glimpse of McPherson coming towards him, walking through a storm of sawdust.

As he waited, his eyes always returning to the bowed form of Abner, the latter backed away from Hatton, and catching his heel on the end of a board started to fall backward. Before he realized his own action, Stanley had leaped forward and had hurled the cruiser violently forward, causing him to bump into Hatton.

"What in sin—" Abner began to protest, when he stopped, his wrinkled face turning white.

He pointed a trembling hand at a small saw,



revolving silently, and Hatton nodded his head to show that he understood. If it had not been for Stanley he would have fallen upon this and death must have been the result. Bub, quick of eye, pointed to Stanley's sleeve, where the sharp teeth had slit the cloth like a razor. Actuated by one impulse the group moved for the door, where Stanley delivered his message to McPherson.

As he was about to return to his work Abner stayed his steps, saying, "Why ain't ye gittin' ready to start with us? We won't wait a second for ye; not by a long chalk."

"Do you mean I can go?" asked Stanley, hardly believing his senses.

"No, he does not," quickly broke in Hatton. "He feels obliged to you for pushing him off the saw. That's natural. But anyone would have done the same. Hardly a day goes by but what some man lends a hand to prevent injury to another. That's all in a day's work. But you can't make the wood trip. Go back to your work."

"If ye could only see it plain to let him come," pleaded Abner.

"No, sirree! There's too much at stake to risk a misfire just to please a homeless boy. He obtained work in the kitchen and got into a



fight. McPherson interceded and I allowed him to stay. Now he wants to jump that job, it seems. By the time you struck Kennebago stream he would be wanting to return."

"I'd never want to turn back," cried Stanley. "I'd die first."

"Which would inconvenience Whitten. Return to the gang, or get your time," coldly directed Hatton.

Stanley's eyes filled and his heart seemed as if it would burst. Then he wheeled and walked back to the manager, his face strained and his eyes feverish. "If I can give you one practical idea which you will adopt, will you let me make the cruise?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Hatton's first impulse was to repulse him harshly; but he changed his mind and in a sneering tone replied, "If you can give any idea that I will adopt you may make the trip. If you don't give me such an idea you take your time and hunt a new job. I can't afford to have young men around of your importance. You must make good your bluff, or clear out. What is this wonderful idea of yours?"

"Ever since Bub pitched into me last night for not using my eyes and brains, even in loading pulp and lumber, I've been thinking and



thinking; so if the idea is any good a part of the credit is due to him—”

“Leave out all this explanation. What is the idea?” barked Hatton.

“It’s this,” desperately replied Stanley; “pipe the pulp to the paper mill instead of pressing it out in squares and sending it by cars.”

Hatton stood rigid, his eyes blazing and boring into Stanley’s flushed face.

“It struck me as practical,” cried Stanley, believing his last chance to be gone, including an opportunity of earning a bed and board. “They sluice logs from Peppercorn to Richardson lake. Even a six feet drop, the men tell me, is sufficient in a mile sluiceway. It’s a sharp grade to the paper mills below. You’d only have to be careful that there were no pockets for the pulp to settle in and harden. It seemed to me that it would be considerably cheaper than hiring men to press and load and transport and unload the pulp.”

“When did you think of that scheme?” asked Hatton in a low voice, never removing his searching gaze.

“This morning, while waiting for the seven o’clock whistle. I was hating the work, to be honest, and wondering how it could be done



away with," mumbled Stanley, shifting uneasily from foot to foot.

"And that is your idea?" continued Hatton in the same voice.

"Yes; I know it isn't much. It seemed a good one when I first thought of it," surrendered Stanley. "But I can see now that if it were any good a man of your experience would have thought of it. So, I'll get my time and quit. Good-by, Bub." And he turned aside as he extended his hand; for he had grown to love Bub without knowing it, and he feared that tears would fill his eyes and cause him to appear unmanly.

"McPherson," called Hatton loudly. "Put another man on the loading gang in place of Reddy. He's going north on the cruise. And, McPherson, send the surveyor up to the office and get me figures on a couple of miles of sewer pipe. Hope you have a good trip, Whitten. Don't come back unless you win out."

Neither of the astounded trio could believe his ears. Hatton had nearly gained his office before a word was said, and then Abner yelled, "Wal, I vum!"

"Why, Stan, it means you're going!" fairly screamed Bub, as the true situation finally filtered through his head.



“Are you sure?” gasped Stanley.

“Of course he’s sure, ye young inventor,” heartily assured Abner. “Pipe line for pulp. Pulp pipe line. Who’d a thought it? And all out of his own head! And the boss never thought of it. Bet he gits a letter of thanks and a raise in pay for his ‘idea.’ Wal, wal, wal.”

“Stanley, I take it all back,” said Bub in an awed voice. “To think of your going to work and thinking that out all alone. What I told you someone had told me, but you make an entirely new thought.”

“I never would have thought of it if you hadn’t dinged into me so and if Abner hadn’t refused to take me along,” reminded the happy youth.

“Stop talking and git ready. The gas boat is waiting at the landing,” commanded Abner, once again assuming the rôle of timber cruiser.

The delighted youths sprinted to the boarding house where Bub’s slender outfit was ready to be strapped on his back.

“I’ve got some extra blankets,” bubbled Bub. “That’s all you need till we strike the Kennebago wangan. There you’ll be outfitted like the rest of us. This is going to be a very lively trip, my son.”



"It can't be too lively for me," joyously proclaimed Stanley.

"It can for me," soberly declared Bub. "I've been in the woods lots of times, and when you git way in things seem different. I shouldn't be surprised if you had some of the starch taken out of your courage before you see the mills again."

"Pooh, pooh," belittled Stanley. "We're four and need not be afraid of anything. I say, Abner, why do we carry so many rifles? I thought game was protected at this time of year."

"Some critters are never protected by game laws," grimly replied Abner.

"Bears and panthers?" hazarded Stanley.

"The bears won't hurt us, I guess. And what ye call panther is at the worst the Canadian lynx, that only fights men when cornered. But there is other critters I won't mention and hope we won't meet. Here comes Noisy Charlie, on time to a second as usual."

This was the guide, an Indian. He had been nicknamed "Noisy" because it was seldom one heard him speak. The lumber men thought it a good jest to represent him to strangers as being loquacious.

"This young man goes with us, Charlie,"



informed Abner as the Indian took the lead, walking with long strides.

A guttural sound was the only acknowledgment Charlie made. The others seemed infected by his silence and hardly a word was spoken till the wharf was reached. Then Abner gave sharp commands and the motor boat was headed for Rapid river.

But youth will have its way and before the little craft had chugged a mile on its course Stanley and Bub were evidencing their high spirits by a rapid fire of questions and jokes. Even Abner melted a bit beneath their sallies, while Charlie expanded his nostrils and stared dreamily at the hill covered shores.

"Why do you start so early on a cruise?" asked Stanley, now hungry for information.

"Leaves ain't out and we can see better," mumbled Abner.

"I've been out on the crust. That's lots of fun," cried Bub.

"Crust no good," muttered Charlie. "Deer hear; no shoot."

"Eating's more necessary than good walking," agreed Abner, smacking his thin lips at the mention of venison.

In a short time Rapid river was reached. Here the boat was abandoned. A three mile



tramp brought the party to a second motor boat belonging to the company. This boat made the entire trip through the great lakes to the mouth of the Kennebago, where the four landed and struck into a tote road.

"I thought we were to make the trip by canoe," remarked Stanley, beginning to feel a bit disappointed.

"Think canoes grow on bushes?" quietly asked Abner. "Ain't gitting sick of the job so quick, be ye?"

"O no, indeed," hastily replied Stanley.

"We'll walk about a mile and then we'll strike the wangan and our eighteen foot canoe," whispered Bub. "Want to go on ahead? I'll show you a good trick. Can I show Stanley my crow trick?" The last to Abner.

"Wal, I don't know as we'll have time," Abner was beginning to refuse when Charlie grunted, "Good trick. Make fool of crow."

"Go ahead, but don't git lost," warned Abner.

Bub sprang ahead, closely followed by Stanley. Making a sharp detour to the left he forced his way some distance through the rank growth till he came to the edge of a bog, or swamp. Here he stationed Stanley in some bushes, and warning him to keep perfectly



quiet, took up a position at the foot of a scraggly pine. First he drew his coat collar up over his head and thrust his hands into his pockets. Then he began making a choking sound, a most alarming noise to Stanley. Almost as soon as Bub began his vocal efforts a crow cawed excitedly from the other side of the swamp. The cry was taken up and repeated from all points of the compass, and to Stanley's great amazement a score of black winged investigators swept into the small clearing. Stanley rubbed his eyes in wonderment to see the crows circle about the bowed figure and then fiercely assail it. More came, and more, until the air was black with them. Stanley estimated that fully two hundred were buffeting and pecking at Bub's silent form. And the choking sound continued. The crows now seemed like demons, red of eye and bristling of feather. Their harsh, discordant voices seemed fairly to scream as they renewed their attacks.

Then Stanley received his second surprise. Bub beat a hand against his leg and hooted like an owl. Instantly every crow turned in flight and faded from view like so many black shadows.

"But what does it all mean?" begged Stan-



ley, as Bub proudly arranged his collar and left the tree.

“The choking sound was a young crow being choked to death,” he explained. “The minute a crow heard it he gave the signal and the warning was cawed from crow to crow. ‘Come-and-bring-help,’ was what the first feller said. The next came on the jump, sending back word over his shoulder. If I’d kept on I’d had every crow in the plantation here.”

“But why did they leave?” puzzled Stanley.

“Why, when I slapped my leg they thought it was the flap of a wing. Then I hooted like an owl and they felt sure Mister Owl was in their midst. Funny thing, a crow is mighty curious and smart, but they are easily fooled. They know when a man has a gun and all that. But they ain’t learned that owls hunt at night. Queer, eh?”

“What’s that?” whispered Stanley, nervously clutching his companion’s arm and pointing into the underbrush. “I saw something move.”

For an answer Bub picked up a stick and threw it into the thicket. Then he dashed forward, only to soon return carrying in his arms a stupid looking fowl, dark of body and barred with darker colors.



"It's a booby," he explained, holding the bird out at arm's length and surveying it critically. "It's a wonder he ever grows up. He won't run when you throw things at him. He's simply stupid. That's why they call him booby. He's really a Canadian grouse. Up here they're called spruce partridge. They're good to eat, but taste a little strong. Go it!" And he tossed the bird from him. With a low squawk it ambled leisurely into the bushes.

"This life is great," cried Stanley, enthusiastically, throwing back his shoulders and breathing deep and long.

"We haven't started yet," smiled Bub. "It's been easy going so far; but wait. My, but it's getting late. We must hurry."

"There is nothing to hurt us, is there?" asked Stanley, quickening his pace.

"N-o," replied Bub, "but there are easier things than tote roads to follow, once the sun gits down. And when it's dark up here, it's real dark; none of your village darkness, but so black you can't cut it with a knife."

"Here's the road," cried Stanley, his voice much relieved.

"But not our road," corrected Bub. "That was made last year. It leads in where we came from. This is ours dead ahead. See how it's



filling up with alders and willers and shad-bushes."

"You've been over it before," observed Stanley.

"No," said Bub, "My first trip."

"How do you know it then?"

"I know we should go north and that this is the old tote road. One on the other side just like it. Leads up to the lake. The bushes don't fool me 'cause I can see the old timbers left from the first swamping. Now we come to a bit of corduroy road—or poles laid across."

"Kind of tough walking," muttered Stanley, as a limb sprang back and left a livid welt across his forehead.

"O this ain't bad," encouraged Bub. "See, here's where Abner and Charlie went through and Abner got into the muck. See, here's where he slipped off the ends of the poles. Some bad places in here, too. A little later we might find some snakes."

"Don't regret their absence on my account," shuddered Stanley. "It's getting cold."

"The nights are pretty cold up here way into June or July," comforted Bub. "Push on faster. When the sun goes behind that mountain it's going to be some dark in this neighborhood."



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Even as he spoke the shadows began to filter through the swamp and in what seemed to Stanley to be an exceedingly short space of time Bub ahead was but a blur.

“Don’t hustle so,” cried Stanley. “I’m not used to this work. Guess I’ve lost both of my eyes.”

“Hold your head down,” warned Bub, pausing.

“What if we get lost?” asked Stanley in a hushed voice.

“Camp and build two fires near together. Two smokes means ‘lost’ to Abner and me. I’m glad you spoke of it,” said Bub.

The next few rods were covered in silence, and as the two came to a rest Stanley leaped frantically into the air, crying out in inarticulate horror, as a loud “Wish-h-h” hissed at his heels.

“What—what was it?” he half sobbed, crowding close to Bub.

That young gentleman laughed until too weak to laugh longer. Then he pounded Stanley on the back until the latter threatened to get angry.

“O Stanley, Stanley! You’ll finish me yet. I never knew you were a record breaker on jumping. What did you think that was?”



"It sounded like a cat spitting, only more dangerous," sullenly replied Stanley.

"It was a little brown thrasher. She use to scare me before I knew. Really, old feller, if you could have seen—Ha! ha!"

"Quit it! Let's be moving," grumbled Stanley.

This admonition was timely, as the shadows now were very thick and the crude traces of the tote road were rapidly being blotted from the view of even the keen-eyed Bub.

"I think we are about there," Bub was saying, when right beside them the night was made hideous with notes of wrath. The uproar consisted of snarling and growling, ranging from a bass to a shrill key, and each note a menace.

Even Bub lost his composure and with a frightened ejaculation jumped ahead. Stanley kept at his heels, his heart beating wildly.

"Sprint!" hoarsely directed Bub, as they reached a clear space and beheld the light of the wangan twinkling ahead.

"What was it?" cried Stanley, his breath coming in great lumps.

"Slow down; here's the men," panted Bub.

"What you two running for?" demanded Abner as he came up to the exhausted youths.



"Only a little race," replied Bub, speaking with difficulty.

"White face," said Noisy Charlie as they entered into the rays of the kerosene lamp.

"I vum! but ye look as if ye'd seen a ghost. What was it?" asked Abner.

"O nothing," mumbled Stanley.

"Be ye goin' to speak out, or not?" bellowed Abner, striding toward them.

"It was a couple of lucerfees," confessed Bub.

"And they were right at our heels," added Stanley.

Abner reached for his rifle, but Noisy Charlie stayed him by asking, "Make sound like this?" And the youths jumped convulsively from the open doorway and wheeled about with their eyes filled with horror. But Charlie was the author of the alarm.

"It was just like that," said Bub.

"Two foxes fighting," said Charlie, his lips twitching for a second. "Face red now." Stanley and Bub retired to the shadows.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

IN the morning the boys had an opportunity to examine the wangan. It was an old story to Bub, yet he took a delight in pointing out things to Stanley.

"The stock is low now 'cause it's coming on summer. Next fall all these shelves will be filled. For the next month a few crews will cut and peel poplar. Has to be cut and peeled in June, you know; but we don't go in very strong for it," explained Bub.

The outfit consisted of an eighteen foot canoe, weighing about seventy-five pounds and four big calf-skin knapsacks. The latter were capable of holding some three bushels, but Abner divided up the supplies so that he and Charlie carried seventy-five pounds each while Stanley and Bub were required to carry about fifty each. As the canoe was to be used whenever possible and as the frequency of the streams, ponds and lakes permitted of navigation for a large part of the way the packs were only carried when falls and other obstructions



necessitated leaving the water, or when trips inland were made.

The supplies, Stanley noticed, were limited to salt pork, potatoes, bacon and flour, salt and coffee and a generous supply of tobacco.

“Our bill of fare will get a bit monotonous,” whispered Stanley as he took his place in the middle of the canoe.

“You’ll find it tastes mighty good, and when we add a trout or a partridge you’ll say it’s the best you ever ate,” declared Bub. “Trust Abner to keep in supplies.”

“Where will we camp?” inquired Stanley, hungry for information and beginning to feel that he was a veteran woodsman.

“Where’d ye advise?” drawled Abner, who overheard the query.

Not to be caught Stanley took his time in surveying the rugged landscape. The black growth, or cedar and tamarack in the lowlands extending up to the spruce and fir, was interspersed at intervals by hardwood ridges. Near the banks of the stream patches of ghostly birch grew tall and slim.

“Well,” he finally decided, “I’d go up between those two hills and camp on some high, dry spot.”



Charlie made a sound in his throat and dug viciously with his paddle, while Abner in a voice trembling with impatience, asked "Why?"

"For two things," replied Stanley, now confident he was answering correctly. "I'd camp where I could get a fine view of the mountains to the west and northwest and where I wouldn't get cold from sleeping near the water."

"By jing! if we was nearer the mills I'd go back and jump on that there saw and tell 'em to keep ye chained," exploded Abner.

"Good!" endorsed Charlie.

"Why! what have I said now?" cried Stanley.

"What are we out here for?" rebuked Abner, resting his paddle. "Are we here for views, or timber? Why do we foller the streams? It's because the timber has got to come down the streams. I'm surprised at ye. It don't seem as if ye'd live long enough to yard so much ignorance."

"Good talk," muttered Charlie.

"We camp on streams 'cause the timber must come to the streams," added Abner. "Try and remember that. It ain't no good to find spruce if ye can't git it out."

"Then I'd camp under those birches on the



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bank and have them cut and shipped down to the lake the first thing," Stanley sought to mollify.

Charlie's moosehide moccasin beat an angry tattoo.

"Keep it up and you'll go overboard," groaned Bub, under his breath.

"Is it possible!" murmured Abner, appealing to the back of Charlie's head. "To think of Abner Whitten taking a younker out in the woods who don't even know that birch can't be floated down stream. Why in sin do ye s'pose them birch has been left?" he continued, now raising his voice. Then before Stanley could attempt to reply he ran on, "It's because they ain't near a railroad and because they can't go in the drive. Ye can tow 'em across a lake, but ye can't drive 'em. They're too heavy."

"I see," mumbled Stanley, hanging his head.

"Don't see," corrected Charlie, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"Ye right, Charlie; he don't see nothing," cried Abner, to whom the youth's lack of knowledge seemed incredible.

"He saw a saw," meekly reminded Bub.

Abner half opened his mouth, then swallowed convulsively. "I beg yer pardon, young man.



There's a first time to everything. Mebbe ye'll larn a few things after a while."

"Why don't you tell him that maple and beech won't go in a drive any more'n birch will?" indignantly demanded Bub. "You're the worst man to pick on a feller that I ever see."

"I'll tan your jacket some day," mildly promised Abner, lighting his pipe. Then kindly, "What Bub says is correct, of course; only I s'posed everyone knew it. Very little maple and beech are cut up here and it's only a doller'n half stumpage."

"I don't know what that means," desperately confessed Stanley.

"It means ye can go in and cut all you want and pay only a doller'n half a cord. Stumpage means the value of the timber as it grows," patiently explained Abner.

"Boy learn when old man," grunted Charlie. "Carry 'round falls."

Thus far the four had been paddling through dead water, but now the guide's keen ears caught the sound of falling water, although it was some time before the voyagers came to the obstruction. It was Stanley's first experience in making a "carry" and he dimly realized that life in the woods might under cer-



tain conditions have its physical drawbacks. Not only the packs and rifles had to be toted for a considerable distance, but the canoe also, of course. Above the falls Abner and Charlie put aside the paddle and poled up the swift water.

Then came more "carries," around rapids, called "rips" by Bub, around big trees that had fallen out into the stream.

It was when about to enter Kennebago lake that Stanley received a second lesson in wood life. The canoe was floating idly near a broad expanse of bog when there sounded a cry that was suggestive of the cackling of a hen. In the domestic environment of the farmyard Stanley would have paid no heed, but out here, with no signs of human habitations to break the monotony of woods and water, the noise caused him to start nervously.

The others in the canoe lifted their heads quickly on having heard it, Bub being unusually grave of face. Stanley, with Abner's sarcasm fresh in mind, did not venture to seek information. He thought Charlie quickened his stroke and from this decided there must be a danger signal in the harsh note. From the tail of his eye he observed that Abner was gazing apprehensively towards the bog, and he wished that he might be given a paddle and be allowed to



aid in some degree in making from the shore. He also wished that Charlie would turn out into the open lake and not hold a parallel course. But he said nothing. If danger confronted them he would prove he could meet it in a manly fashion.

Then the paddles were held motionless and the two men and Bub seemed to be listening intently. The strain was beginning to tell on Stanley when the cackle exploded right at his side, and with a half smothered cry he started to his feet.

"Sit down! Squat!" thundered Abner, as the canoe tipped to a dangerous angle.

"What—what was it?" whispered Stanley, staring at the water and discovering nothing.

"Mebbe bear," said Charlie.

"Keep still," commanded Abner, as the sound again rose from the side of the canoe and Stanley was about to capsize the craft.

The sight of Bub, trailing his paddle, overcome by laughter assured Stanley there could be no danger and he grinned sheepishly.

"O my son!" feebly exclaimed Bub, "we knew you'd do it. The minute I heard it I knew you'd git anxious if we kept quiet and sort of sober. What a treat you're going to be to me."



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"I'm through being nervous," muttered Stanley. "If a panther leaps into the canoe I won't stir a peg."

"Wal, ye come near dumping us just 'cause of a water bird," chuckled Abner. "If any-one but Charlie was forward we'd been in the lake. That's one reason I made ye lash everything tight this morning. If we didn't git dumped in swift water I figgered on your doing it in still."

"But where is it? I heard it at my elbow?" puzzled Stanley, now intent only on satisfying his curiosity.

Bub caught his arm and pointed to a speck on the water. "There it is," he informed. "It's a water bird, called the pied billed grebe. It swims under water with just its nostrils out. I used to take city fellers out just to see them fidget. Always strike 'em near bogs. If a city chap is alone he'll think he's haunted and will hike into camp pale as a ghost."

On making camp that night Stanley went with Bub without knowing the programme. Under Bub's direction he cut a quantity of long poles and carried them to where a giant boulder presented a perpendicular face.

"Just the rock I wanted," cried Bub.

"Why?" vacantly inquired Stanley.



“Watch and learn, my son,” advised Bub. He then placed a long pole between the crotches of two convenient saplings at a distance of about three feet from the face of the rock. “This is the front of the leanto,” he explained, rapidly laying the poles from this support to the ground.

“But you can’t see anything,” protested Stanley, deciding the structure to be very impractical.

“I’m building this to sleep in,” reminded Bub. “There you are; ten feet from opening to the back, ten feet wide and eight feet high. Now when we build a fire against the rock the heat will be reflected onto us as we sleep, and we’ll be snug as bears in a holler tree. Now cut some more poles as the ground is rough and Abner always wants it poled up even, with the slant towards the fire. While you’re doing that I’ll fix the roof.”

Catching the idea Stanley soon secured a second bundle of poles and without being instructed skillfully arranged them in the leanto.

“Good work,” applauded Bub. “You can do things all right once you’ve been shown. Now watch me lay these spruce boughs, tips down. It’s wonderful how few boughs will make a leanto waterproof. Pine boughs are



even better. And there we have a right angle triangle of a house, with the roof as the hypotenuse."

"But it's warm enough to sleep out of doors," said Stanley.

"You've been hustling," smiled Bub. "Wait till the sun goes down. The nights are cold up here and you'll like your blankets. Charlie will do the squaw work and keep the fire going through the night, but you and I will git the wood. He'll want the sticks six or eight feet long. Then we'll have to git some boughs for the floor."

Charlie and Abner now appeared, the former carrying two partridge, while Abner had a string of trout.

"I thought it was against the law to kill birds," innocently observed Stanley. "And, say, I didn't hear any gun."

"Bird try to bite; I kill um," gravely informed Charlie.

Abner smiled dryly and said, "We'll have the trout to-night and the birds to-morrow for breakfast." Saying this he quickly cut the fish down the back, cleaned them and arranged them in a common bread toaster. Slices of salt pork were also added.



Stanley was keenly interested in observing how Charlie prepared the birds. Cleaning them with incredible quickness he brought from the shore a mass of clay and without removing the feathers placed the clay about the birds until each was a huge moist ball. Before so enveloping them he filled them with a dressing made of bread and onions, several of the latter being brought for this purpose.

“Who do you expect to eat that mess?” asked Stanley, turning up his nose in disgust.

“I will if I git to it first,” assured Bub.

“Bah! it’s all clay. I’m not a clay eater.”

“No one will make ye eat it,” said Abner. “I’ll eat yer share.”

After the evening meal the two men smoked in silence for a short time and then knocking out their pipes into the carefully arranged fire they proceeded to turn in between the blankets, lying with their feet to the blaze.

“It’s too early for bed,” whispered Stanley.

“You’ll git use to going to bed early up here,” explained Bub. “It’s impossible to sleep after sun-up. Minute it begins to git light seems if you must be up and hustling.”

It was Stanley’s first night in a leanto. The



wangan had furnished a roof; now he was in the open and was about to learn his first experience in night sounds.

Charlie and Abner were breathing heavily when close at hand rang out a murderous shriek. Appalling in its menace to ignorant ears it was small wonder that Stanley gave a frightened gasp and flopped over between Abner and Bub.

"Git off of me," groaned Abner. "What's the matter with ye?"

"Didn't you hear it?" asked Stanley, his heart thumping loudly.

"Great horned owl," sleepily informed Bub. "Shut up." Bub might have added that it was perhaps the wildest cry in nature in this region where the flora and fauna of the south meet the Hudsonian and Canadian animate and inanimate life, and resulting in a wonderful variety. But Bub was too sleepy and Stanley crept back to his place on the outside, still nervous from the shock.

Then it seemed as if the entire night was filled with blood-curdling threats. To the nerve tingling cry of the owl were added the blood chilling scream of the Canadian lynx, called the lucerfee, the explosive "qua!" of the "qua bird," or black crowned night heron, and



the hideous voice of the old squaw duck, sometimes styled the "soap-bubble" bird from its rapidly repeated "a-wa-wa-wa-wa." Each of these unfamiliar voices contained a horrible threat to the untutored youth, and only by a great effort did he keep from crying aloud. Overhead a Wilson snipe was giving its weird wing sound of "hoo-hoo-hoo" in a whistling note.

"There is something about to attack us," he finally cried out, unable to control himself as a heavy step sounded near his head.

"Consarn it! can't ye keep quiet?" angrily cried Abner. "Think I'm going to set up nights with ye?"

"But I tell you, some big creature is just outside," insisted Stanley.

"Porcupine," quietly explained Charlie.

"Yas, it's a porcupine," growled Abner. "It walks heavy and sounds like a bear, but it ain't. Now go to sleep."

"Hark," was Stanley's reply. "Can't you hear it? Two men talking in the woods." As he paused there came a muffled note, indeed resembling the voices of two men conversing in low tones.

"That's a coon," impatiently informed Abner.



"Please quit, Stan," begged Bub. "I want to go to sleep."

"Yas, git to sleep," commanded Abner. "And when ye hear a sound of some one scolding under their breath don't rouse me up by jumping onto my chest. For it won't be nothing but a skunk. And if ye hear a pumping sound, don't grab for a rifle, for it'll be the 'stakedriver,' or bittern. If ye hear a o-hoo it's a black bear, but he won't bother us. And I guess that's about all ye'll be afraid of to-night. Now, keep shut."

"I'm going out and down to the water," said Stanley, quietly.

"Why?" gasped Abner, sitting up.

"Because I'm afraid," confessed Stanley.

"Him good boy," remarked Charlie as before he could be prevented, Stanley disappeared in the darkness.

"Blame it all!" growled Abner. "Whoever see such a feller? S'pose one of us must go fetch him back. He'll either go insane, or git lost."

"Wait. I git him by'mby," said Charlie.

In the meantime Stanley cautiously felt his way down to the water's edge, palpitating in every nerve. He was trying to punish himself for entertaining any sensation of fear; and the



sweat stood thick on his forehead as he advanced. Abner said it was a coon; his nerves told him it was two men talking in stealthy voices, probably talking about him. He dropped to the ground as the great horned owl sounded its terrible cry above his head.

But as he steeled his courage and doggedly advanced he became conscious of a new note, a note of sweetness and love. It was the night flight song of the woodcock, only he gave credit to three birds for the music. First came the beautiful twitter as the bird rose in huge spirals into the evening sky; then in descending flowed the pure strains of a canary, quickly followed by a slightly nasal, clarionet-like "b-z-z."

He forgot the possible o-hoo of the bear and the hoot-owl's similar call. The barking of a fox passed unnoted and the trilling, booming chorus near at hand was unheard; for now the beautiful night sounds were flooding him with a wonderful melody and the harsher notes were as if they never had been. Out somewhere in the darkness the Old Ben Peabody bird, or white-throated sparrow, was vying with the Phoebe bird, and waves of music rippled across the lake and smothered the bog in harmony.

But the sweetest of all was the good-night song of the hermit thrush. It came in a lull,



as if in the evening's programme a place of honor had been reserved for this incomparable songster. Stanley's eyes filled with tears as the sad, sweet notes were poured forth. It seemed as if the singer were telling about other days, when all was pure and true, and a shadow of homesickness fell upon the youth as he sought to interpret the song.

With bowed head he stumbled along the bank and without any particular purpose groped his way back to the lean-to.

Charlie was re-arranging the fire, seemingly; in reality about to set forth in quest of the wanderer.

"Git nerve back?" asked Charlie, gently.

"I heard the most beautiful song," cried Stanley. "It will ring in my ears at night-fall, so long as I live, I hope."

"See bear? See panther?" gravely inquired the guide.

"No; I saw nothing. I was so absorbed with my music that I nearly broke my neck tripping over the canoe. When I fell my hand fortunately struck the paddle and I saved myself."

Noisy Charlie straightened with the lithe ease and quickness of a panther and picked up his rifle. Abner, too, seemed electrified and



rose quickly if awkwardly and reached for his firearm. To Stanley's further surprise Bub rolled over and seized his weapon.

"What's the matter?" whispered Stanley.

"Don't you see; you found a canoe with paddles. It's someone snooping 'round to do us dirt. If it was a friend he'd come up to the fire and take pot luck," rapidly explained Bub, examining his rifle.

"Why! it was our canoe, I supposed," muttered Stanley.

Bub, despite his excitement, found time to smile whimsically. "We brought our paddles up here. You lugged 'em," he reminded.

"All stay here. I go," harshly commanded Charlie.

"The Injun has the best head for this sort of thing," murmured Abner, lying flat and pushing his rifle ahead of him.

Stanley rubbed his eyes in fresh wonder; Noisy Charlie had vanished. One moment he was one of the group; the next he was gone. And no sound betrayed the course of his going.

Then with staccato sharpness and abruptness came the report of a rifle, followed by several more.



“By jing! they’ve jumped him!” cried Abner, rising to his feet.

“Let us run to the rescue,” said Stanley, his teeth chattering even as he was willing to advance.

“Ye two keep quiet and stay here. If they nailed him Charlie don’t need any help. If they missed him he’ll take care of hisself.”

“They missed him,” murmured Bub. “Someone fired at him and he returned the compliment.”

As he finished Charlie stood with them again, coming as silently as he had gone.

“Big Nick,” he quietly informed. “Come to kill canoe, stop trip. I fool him. He shoot. I shoot. He gone.”

“Was he alone?” queried Abner anxiously.

“Alone here. Friends near,” replied Charlie. “Big canoe. Friends bring him most here. Come rest alone. Go now to find friends. Bad place to have boys. Go to sleep now.” And calmly returning to his blanket he quickly fell asleep. Abner followed his example, but Bub and Stanley remained awake for more than an hour, conversing in quivering whispers.

“There’s going to be trouble,” declared Stanley for the twentieth time.



“Charlie ain’t talked as much in years as he has to-night,” said Bub. “My son, you wanted things exciting. I’m sorry to say you’re going to have your wish.”



## CHAPTER SIX

### LEFT ALONE

WHEN Stanley opened his eyes next morning he was surprised to behold the two men and Bub up and busy about the fire.

“We let you sleep this morning, but hereafter you must be stirring at sun-up,” informed Bub, sternly.

“Very well,” said Stanley, meekly. “Now I’m awake, what shall I do?”

“Eat,” said Charlie, his eyes glittering as he pawed from the coals two blackened balls that once were moist clay.

“Thank you; but I prefer salt pork, or bacon and a cup of coffee,” replied Stanley, wrinkling up his nose as he recalled the guide’s preparation of the birds.

“A cup of coffee, please,” mimicked Bub, daintily switching to the coffee-pot and filling a tin dipper. “Wait a moment and I’ll git you a fresh napkin.”

“Stop kidding,” said Stanley shortly. “I meant a dipper—Why!”

The exclamation was evoked by Charlie’s



breaking open the clay balls and exposing the grouse cooked to a turn with all the feathers adhering to the clay, leaving the flesh as smooth and clean as if it had been carefully plucked. And the odor was very pleasing.

“Fix some salt pork and taters for the younker, Charlie,” ordered Abner. “He don’t care for fowl.”

“I—I beg your pardon, Mr. Whitten, and yours, Charlie,” stuttered Stanley. “But I’ve changed my mind. I’ll have some of the bird.”

“You should say what you mean at the go-in,” rebuked Abner, eying the breakfast gloomily as he feared there would not be enough to go around. However, when he fell to he ate but little, and Bub winked luxuriously at Stanley.

“Hurry up. Time to go,” said Charlie, sententiously, beginning to pack the knapsacks.

“Where are we bound for?” eagerly asked Stanley, recalling the excitement of the night before.

“Ye and Bub will go to a place we have picked out for ye. Ye are to stay there till me and Charlie call for ye,” said Abner.

“Where is it?” asked Bub, showing no surprise.

“Charlie will show ye the trail,” replied Ab-



ner. "He did a little cruising this morning before ye woke up. It's a small deserted shack. Big Nick has been stopping there, but he's far away by this time. We're going to follow him."

"He won't come back and find us, will he?" anxiously inquired Stanley.

"No; and if he does it's Bub he'll be looking for," cynically reminded Abner. "If it had been Bub instead of ye a mooning down by the water last night he'd met with some trouble, I'm a thinking."

"I ain't afraid of any half-breed," said Bub stoutly.

"Boy foolish," observed Charlie.

"Wal, I guess there'll be no danger," slowly decided Abner. "Not so much as if ye was with us. We'll be between ye and Nick and we're sartain he won't beat back. He knows Charlie would pick up his trail this morning and by this time he's on his way to join them that hired him."

"Who hired him?" cried Bub, his mouth opening in curiosity.

"Never ye mind; leave that for yer elders and betters," discouraged Abner. "He never come here and tried to spoil our canoe of his own idee. Someone put him up to it. Of



course, he's glad to pay off any scores he thinks he owes the company, but he'd never monkey 'round Charlie's camp less there was a jug of rum and a few dollars in it for pay. I don't give a rap about finding him; I'm only anxious to find them he's going to report to."

Stanley felt but little confidence as the two men made ready to leave, but Bub displayed no loss of spirits. "See that bunch of red spruce?" shortly inquired Abner, pointing, as Stanley thought, in a very indefinite manner.

Bub did not suspend his shrill whistling, but nodded cheerfully.

"When ye strike it ye'll find a back-blaze to the north. The way is so plain you can't get lost. Two miles will fetch ye to the shack. It must have been put up in the old days when they was cutting the old-growth. Ah, them was the days," and Abner sighed as he contrasted the giants of his boyhood, when one spruce might scale more than fifteen hundred feet, with the logs of to-day.

"All right," said Bub. "Grab your duffle, Stan, and we'll be moving. So long, folks."

Stanley had expected a different parting, a shaking of hands, a show of regret, and for the moment he felt hurt at the curtness of their leave taking. Charlie gave them no heed



whatever, while Abner, returning to his task of rolling his blankets merely nodded his head in dismissal.

Bub shrewdly diagnosed his companion's emotions and smiled whimsically. "Not strong on sentiment, eh?" he grinned. "You'll git used to that, my son. Once, when I was green, I got mad with Abner up north of Parmachena and quit him in the night. I was lost for three days, but at last saw his smoke and got to him. I didn't even have matches and couldn't make my two smokes. When I staggered into the clearing he was smoking his pipe. All he said was, 'Guess we need a little more wood, Bub.' Never mentioned my running away to this day."

"That sounds very harsh," condemned Stanley. "When folks part in the city they're civilized enough to shake hands and say 'good-by.'"

Bub fired up at that. "And I guess one of them city folks will quit his work and go out and hunt up a stranger, or tramp through the woods, or paddle down a river for a doctor, if a neighbor's sick, eh? As for being harsh, there never was a minute Abner couldn't put his hand on me. He knew I wouldn't starve for a day or so and he let me have my sulks



out. If your city friends was so mighty nice to you why did you quit 'em? Why didn't you git one of them to find you a job?"

Stanley's face drew down piteously and his lips trembled as he struggled to frame some reply. In a second warm-hearted Bub had seized his hand and was crying, "I'm a brute, Stan. Just kindly give me a few kicks. But you riled me by knocking the wood-folks. We ain't got time for sentiment. It don't mean we don't feel it, but it doesn't fit in with the rough life of the woods. Say you forgive me; for I'm mighty glad no one got you a job in the city and kept you from coming up here."

"It's all right, Bub," said Stanley, winking his eyes rapidly. "It hurt because there's lots of truth in it. I had to come up here to get a chance."

"Now, here's the spruce and here's the trail," cried Bub, wishing to divert Stanley's moody thoughts.

"Trail?" blankly repeated Stanley, staring about. "I don't even see a path."

Bub's fresh laughter rang out loudly, causing two gossiping crows on a dead pine to scold furiously. "Why, you poor innocent! Did you expect to find a road? There's a trail dead ahead."



"I see nothing, not the sign of a foot-print," stubbornly insisted Stanley.

"If there was a path you wouldn't need a blaze," explained Bub, still hugely amused. "Now, look. See anything on the trees?"

"You mean the trees with pieces chipped out of the bark?"

"Sure! that's just what I mean. See, you can count a dozen of 'em, all in a line. As we go on we'll find more. As long as you pass blazed trees you know you are following the trail," encouraged Bub.

"So, whoever came this way first stopped and made those marks?" inquired Stanley, much interested.

"No, he made 'em when coming back," returned Bub.

"I admit my ignorance; why try to fool me all the time?" reproached Stanley, sternly.

"Ha! ha! You're an awfully good feller, Stan; but you're funny. Now wait; I'm not fooling you. When the man came in here he wanted to find his way out, didn't he?"

Stanley relaxed his lips and nodded, albeit a bit coldly.

"So, as he passed a tree he chipped the side he would see when *coming out*. Take this tree; look on the other side. See; he made that



blaze going in. Now after he got in and decided he would want to come again, to build the shack, or for any other purpose, he followed his trail back and chipped the trees on the side we now see."

"But why didn't he chip, or blaze both sides when going in?" asked Stanley, his brows frowning.

"Because he did not know when he went in if he would ever come this way again. If he wanted to come back this way he made his back-blaze. That would lead him out. But he wouldn't spend time blazing both sides till he knew if he wanted to go over that trail again."

"What did he make the trail for; a road?"

"O no. When you blaze for a road you blaze a tree on each side of where you want the road to go," answered Bub.

"Well," decided Stanley, "I can see how Abner and Charlie have an easy time following the half-breed."

"Stanley, you don't mean that! It's too good to be true," roared Bub, now convulsed with mirth.

"Say, Bub Thomas, we've been good friends, but you annoy me," exclaimed Stanley.

"What have I said that is so amusing?"

"I must laugh if you kill me," sobbed Bub.



## 102 THE YOUNG TIMBER-CRUISERS

“The idea of Big Nick, in trying to git away, stopping to kindly blaze trees to show his pursuers where he is bound for!”

“I’ll admit, it does sound rather silly,” conceded Stanley. “Yet Abner said they would find his trail.”

“My dear boy, he meant that Charlie would find a foot-print, the mark of the canoe against the shore, a broken branch, a stone turned over, and the like. He meant that Charlie would see signs of Nick’s flight where you and I would see nothing.”

“Then all trails are not like this and a road trail?”

“I should say not. Say a man wants to hide something in the big woods; or wants to keep secret a pocket where he is gitting amethysts and tourmalines and the like, he makes a trail no one else can find. Once I found a runaway hive of bees and knew the hollow tree was about filled with honey. I wanted to wait till it got cool in the fall, when the bees would be numb and not wanting to sting me. So I took some reindeer lichen and fixed a trailer here and there on a tree. Some of it took root and grew; some died, but retained its color, and no one would imagine it meant anything. And I got the honey.”



"Bub, you're a wonder," admired Stanley, eying his shorter companion with a feeling of awe. "I suppose you'll be studying up something entirely new in trails before long?"

"I have already," replied Bub, complacently. "I got the idea from a piece of orange peel."

"Why! how could you?" cried Stanley.

"City chap hired me to take him out trout fishing. He took an orange along and as he ate it he threw away the skin. I noticed that a bit of that peeling stuck out in the landscape like a sore thumb. I never saw a color that would beat it. If the peeling fell orange side up you couldn't go anywhere near it without noticing it. It's about the only thing I ever saw in the color line that seemed to jar with nature. So, I told Abner that if we could have some paraffine chalk, orange color, we could save blazing trees, save the bark as well as time, and have a trail you could never miss. The paraffine wouldn't wash out. Then on ledges and rocks, where you have to depend on small piles of rocks, it would be just the thing to make your trail with. They have it at the wangan in red and yellow for marking lumber, but them colors won't do. I want an orange."



"I wish I knew what you do," sighed Stanley. "You are ahead of me in books, even."

"O no I ain't; and I guess I'll never git so I can talk properly," lamented Bub so dolefully that Stanley burst into a laugh.

"Here we are at a stream and—beaver, by jinks! What do you think of that for logging, my son?" And Bub danced enthusiastically along the bank of a sixteen-foot stream.

"Where's the beaver?" asked Stanley, peering about.

"The beaver went into hiding long before we got here," said Bub. "But that is their dam." And he pointed to an embankment, made of clay and timbers, extending across the stream, the concave side being upstream. "Now follow me and we'll find their run-ways, or sluice-ways."

Stanley followed him across, walking on the dam, and soon was gazing at little smooth paths leading up the bank.

"There's six of 'em," counted Bub. "See their timber." And he indicated several neat piles of sticks, measuring from four to six feet in length and from two to four inches in diameter. "I tell you, the beaver is a mighty cute feller. And he knows the lumber game better than we do."



"But why does he do it?" queried Stanley, studying the little piles almost incredulously.

"He lumbers because he's a fisherman. He builds this dam to hold back the fish. I take off my hat to the beaver," declared Bub.

"I supposed all the beaver were killed off," said Stanley.

"Hardly; it was for trapping them that Big Nick lost his license. Besides beaver, we could catch otter, sable, mink, ermine—which is really a small weasel—and the fisher."

Stanley drank this in with avidity and begged his companion to wait a while on the bank and see if some of the little loggers wouldn't put in an appearance.

Bub smiled. "We'll see no beaver, but no reason why we shouldn't loaf a bit. Almost sure to be something coming here. Only, you must keep quiet and motionless."

An hour's silence, however, revealed no new secret of the wood, except as a loon tried for a trout and failed and laughed hideously at the youths when they jeered him.

On the rest of the journey, taken leisurely, Bub pointed out a kingbird successfully attacking a hawk and several woodpeckers telegraphing to their mates on the surface of dead trees.



Just before they emerged into a clearing Bub seized Stanley's wrist and gently drew him back beneath a low growing pine. "It's something big," he whispered, holding his rifle in readiness.

"It's a bear," trembled Stanley, as a huge form crackled towards them through the underbrush.

"No, sirree! It's a twelve-hundred-pound moose," cried Bub under his breath. "See; he's got only one antler. T'other one has been knocked off. He'll lose the other one soon."

The moose at this point, turned sharply and bounded away. "They are never dangerous except in the fall," announced Stanley.

"Wrong, my son; that moose there might have charged us. You can never tell what a moose will do. I've been treed four times by one, and I'd rather have a bear after me any time. A moose is the only thing I'm really afraid of in the woods. No—I'll take that back. Take a three-hundred-pound buck, and he'd be a big one at that weight, and when he's wounded he's a tough customer to meet. He'll fight to the last drop of blood in his body."

The shack bore evidences of being recently occupied and Bub's eyes wandered often to the edge of the woods as he realized that Big Nick



had just left the place and had a score to settle with him. He kept his rifle near at hand whenever leaving the shack.

An old Franklin stove, heavily rusted and broken in several places, did for a fireplace and Stanley added to his small store of woodcraft when he came to build the fire.

"Want to burn us out?" asked Bub, as his friend stooped and placed new fuel on the blaze.

"You said it was all right for me to build a fire here," remonstrated Stanley.

"I forgot you are new," apologized Bub. "But that cedar and hemlock will send sparks flying every which way. Git some beech, or maple, or pine. The pine will smoke, but it won't spark."

"It doesn't seem that I can do anything right," said Stanley.

"Not the first time," readily agreed Bub.

"Is there anything hemlock is good for?" sarcastically inquired Stanley, throwing the offending wood aside.

"Sure," gravely returned Bub, refusing to detect any irony. "The bark is used in tanneries. In the old days they chopped down hemlock and after peeling it they'd leave it to rot in the woods. Big trees, too. Nowadays



they saw them into boards and city people buy them, believing they're spruce or some other kind."

"Bub," cried Stanley despairingly, "is there anything about the woods you don't know?"

"What! me? I mean—I?" exclaimed Bub in genuine amazement. "Why, my son, I know nothing about the woods. I'm simply trying to learn."

"Then what chance do I have to master that information?" asked Stanley.

"Not a chance in the world to master it," quickly replied Bub, now speaking earnestly. "In the first place you are not cut out for a woodsman. You must be born here to really know the timber business. You might handle the office end, but I doubt that. You're not cut out for this sort of thing. You'll pick up a lots—lots what I tell you. Your suggestion to Hatton about the pipe line was a dandy; I'd never had brains enough to think of it in a million years. But you're not the simon pure article as a woodsman. But cheer up, there's lots drawing good salaries who don't know the game any better than you will after you've served your time at it." The last was meant to soothe Stanley, who did not relish this plain speaking.



"Perhaps I made a mistake coming up here," he bitterly remarked.

"Not a bit," cried Bub, clapping his shoulder. "Don't git huffy because I tell you what I believe to be true. You needed to come here. But you are the type that goes back to town and makes a record. You needed to come here to fill out that scrawny frame of yours. Once you've done that you'll make your way almost anywhere."

"Some time I'll tell you more about myself," Stanley slowly began, when Bub interrupted him curtly:

"I haven't asked you to tell anything about yourself. Nor am I a bit curious. I took you to be a bang-up good fellow—notice, I am saying fellow instead of feller—I know you are that kind of fellow. Now let's forget all about everything but something to eat. Git out that open bake sheet and I'll show you how to make real bread. Then we'll catch some trout and have a snack."

Bub's idea of a snack was a meal sufficiently hearty even to satisfy the fears of an Abner Whitten.

That night, after everything had been put in shape, the two remained seated before the fire for more than an hour, loath to go to sleep.



The fresh boughs in the corner invited slumber, but both missed Abner and Charlie. Ordinarily Bub would have thought nothing of living alone in the woods for an indefinite period of time. But now he felt a strange sensation of uneasiness. He almost wished he was in the open with only his blanket for protection.

Finally, in an effort to cast off the spell he boisterously challenged, "I'll dare you to go out doors."

"It is very dark outside," countered Stanley.

"You don't dare go out and walk around the shack."

"But what good will it do? There are bears about here. There are rocks and stumps and it is very dark. It is more comfortable in here."

"I dare you to go," persisted Bub. "You don't dare to and I do."

"Now I haven't admitted I do not dare go," slowly replied Stanley, smiling in deep amusement at Bub's persistence. "I simply say I do not want to go. You say you dare to; you are on record as daring to. So, go ahead."

Bub grinned ruefully, but did not hesitate to rise and reach for his rifle.



"If there is nothing to harm you and you are not afraid, why take the gun?" asked Stanley.

Bub dropped the rifle and slowly opened the door. It was very black outside. As he hesitated a mouse scampered across the log over his head, and with a startled exclamation he slammed the door and leaped back into the room.

Stanley gave way to a hearty burst of laughter, it being about the first time he had found an opportunity to smile at Bub's expense.

"Hush, my son," finally Bub quieted, raising a hand. "I don't blame you for laughing. The mouse made a fool of me; but I've felt uneasy all the evening. My daring you was merely to find an excuse for us to leave here. Now, listen; I'll hear it again soon. Hark! there!"

"A whistle," whispered Stanley.

"Another whistle," muttered Bub, reaching for his rifle.

"Something in the woods, a bird, probably," suggested Stanley, his wrists developing "goose-flesh."

"It's two men signaling to each other," murmured Bub. "They think we are here for the night. We'll make our exit through the window."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### A NARROW ESCAPE

BUB was half way through the small window when Stanley caught him by the leg and pulled him back and relieved him of his rifle.

"We remain here," he announced.

"Let me go! I must git out! I'll face 'em in the open, but won't be cooped up in here!" cried Bub in a frenzy.

Stanley shifted his hold to Bub's shoulder, saying, "Abner said we were to stay here till he came back. Here we stay."

"Don't you hear them?" whispered Bub, his eyes gleaming with fear. "Don't you remember how Big Nick hates me? I must escape from here, Stanley. Let me go."

"This is our place," slowly replied Stanley, passing around his companion so as to block the window. "Abner said stick to the shack. I can be of little help in the woods, but I've got brains enough to obey orders."

"I tell you, Big Nick will kill me," cried Bub.

"Then he'll kill me," stoutly returned Stan-



ley. "For your fight is my fight and I'm sticking by you."

Bub eyed him in growing amazement. Heretofore he had been the leader, almost paternal in his care of the stranger from the city. Now even in his perturbation, he began to realize that they had changed places and Stanley had become the leader. For the first time he noted that Stanley's lean frame had taken on folds of muscle, and, while yet slim of build, presented the picture of glowing health. The blue eyes, too, had a new light, hard as steel, yet clear as crystal. Then the wailing whistle was repeated and Bub was again overwhelmed by a sense of fear.

"I'm going out that winder!" he snarled, violently endeavoring to break clear of the iron-like grip.

But Stanley's experience in handling lumber and loading wet pulp squares had made his hands so many hooks of steel and with a grim smile he pressed Bub into a corner and held him powerless.

"Now you listen to me, Mr. Thomas. We are going to obey orders if we die doing it," gritted Stanley in a low voice. "You can take the lead at all other times, but not just now. For the next few hours I'm the boss."



"Let me alone! Git away from me," hoarsely commanded Bub, struggling in vain.

"Yes, I'll leave you alone now," said Stanley, stepping back. "For I know you are mad clear through and wouldn't leave here if a dozen tigers were about to enter the room. After you've cooled off a bit you'll thank me."

Bub set his jaw and picked up his rifle, his eyes flaming. As Stanley had said, he was ugly from top to toe and no number of Big Nicks could frighten him. He had been the victim of a spasmodic fear; and he was all the more angry to know he had given way to the emotion and had appeared something of a coward in Stanley's eyes. This very realization also caused him to feel resentment towards his companion.

Stanley, on his part, seeing that he won his point quickly subsided into his usual self and studied Bub anxiously. He knew Bub's feelings were hurt and he was only desirous of renewing their old friendship.

To accomplish this he counterfeited a feeling he did not feel and coldly reminded, "I'm waiting to be thanked. I said to-morrow. I've changed my mind. You may thank me now."

Bub glowered at him for a moment, then as the whistle sounded nearer he sighed in relief



and the old sweet smile illumined his face. "Forgive me, Stanley. I was mad clear through at you. But it's all gone now. It's all gone because we are about to have a bully good fight and I shall have a chance to show you I am no coward. Keep back in the corner. This is my row and I'll go through with it alone."

"You know that is impossible," calmly said Stanley, clasping the other's hand. His face was pale and he believed he was about to face a desperate situation, but there was no tremor in his hands, no unsteadiness in his voice. "I told you back at the mills that your troubles were mine, just as you made my troubles yours."

"Well, they'll have a fine time gitting in here," decided Bub, half grinning. "What a ninny I was to try to git outside where Nick would have run me down in five minutes."

Rap! rap! rap! and the door shook.

"I'm going to shoot," cried Bub, throwing forward the rifle.

"Charlie," informed a guttural voice.

"Be careful, ye young tyke," bellowed Abner. "Ye shoot me and I'll skin ye alive."

With a hysterical laugh Bub dropped the



rifle and sank to the floor. It was Stanley who unfastened the bar and greeted the two men.

“What ye think ye’re doing?” rebuked Abner, picking up the rifle and standing it in the corner. “Want to murder us?”

“One boy afraid,” said Charlie, rearranging the fire.

“I’ll admit I was quite frightened,” generously said Stanley.

“He wasn’t,” doggedly denied Bub. “I was scared out of my boots and wanted to climb through the winder. I thought it was Big Nick and his gang. Stanley kept me here against my will. Said it was orders and he’d obey if he was killed.”

“Good for him,” cried Abner.

“Both good boys. Good for boy to git big scare,” added Charlie, over his shoulder.

“Wal, I’m sorry Bub couldn’t take our word for it that we’d keep between him and Nick,” said Abner.

“Boy fool to leave cabin. Boy wise to be scared,” said Charlie.

“We didn’t expect you to-night,” defended Stanley. “We both thought it was an enemy.”

“We followed Big Nick nearly to Cupsuptic river and felt sure he was headed for the



tangled swamps about Weasel Pond. Guess he won't trouble us for a while," explained Abner, his tongue beginning to loosen as Charlie deftly prepared fresh coffee and a spider of potato and bacon.

"Then he's gone for good," gladly exclaimed Stanley.

"Looks that way," said Abner.

"No gone. Come back, by'mby," declared Charlie.

"What did you find?" asked Bub, now eager for details.

"Wal," slowly began Abner; "we found that the Nace gang has cut the public lot in Bill town. They burned it over, but they couldn't cover up the stumps. Guess Nick was trying to keep us from drifting in there."

"Can you prove it against Nace?" asked Bub, his eyes lighting.

"Not very well unless I can find his men. It was cut years ago. He probably got his men up Megantic lake way in Canada and took care to git only Frenchmen who couldn't talk English. After they finished he hustled them across the border. If I could find some of 'em and take 'em up there it could be proved so close that he'd compromise before he'd stand a lawsuit."



"How much did he git out of it?" asked the practical Bub.

"From a hurried look at the stumps I estimated the stumpage to have been worth some twelve thousand dollars. Nace is so tied up in politics he couldn't afford any big scandal this fall when some of his gang is up for election."

"But how could you tell it was a public lot, and what does that mean?" was Stanley's double-barreled question.

"I usually have my pocket maps with me," dryly replied Abner, helping himself generously to potato and bacon.

"And a public lot is a lot given a plantation by the state for school purposes," completed Bub. "Guess there's more'n one such lot that has been raided in the last twenty years."

"Hard work to see line," gravely suggested Charlie, but with a humorous twinkle in his small black eyes.

"Guess they found the line after making the cut," sourly replied Abner. "At first sight you'd say it was an old burn. But just take a walk around and there are the charred stumps of old growth. Don't doubt he cleaned up fully twelve thousand, figgering on eight dollars a thousand which he *didn't* pay."



“How’d you suppose they first noticed the burn?” Bub slyly asked of Stanley.

“By the stumps and blackened ground, of course,” replied Stanley.

“Wrong, my son,” chuckled Bub. “They first came upon a thicket of grey birch and poplar and knew it covered a burn.”

Stanley looked questioningly at Abner, who nodded between mouthfuls. And Bub continued, “After the burn the birch and poplar was about the only thing that would grow in the soil. Up they come and shade it all over. Then the ground gits moist enough for spruce and up comes the spruce in time.”

“But what about the birch and poplar? Is there room for all?” asked Stanley.

“Birch and poplar grow fast and die quick,” replied Bub. “That’s why nature selects ’em to prepare the ground for the more valuable spruce.”

“What do we do next, Mr. Whitten?” inquired Stanley.

“Always perlite when ye want to learn the company’s secrets,” sniffed Abner, pushing back his tin plate. “But I’ve no objection to saying we’ll cruise the east cant of Mt. Jim.”

“Can’t what?” asked Stanley.

“He means jog, innocent,” explained Bub.



“A jog?” repeated Stanley, with no intelligence in his voice.

“Can’t ye learn nothing?” complained Abner. “A cant is a watershed. Part of our timber up north will go down Dead river to the Kennebec and part will follow the west cant and go down the Kennebago.”

“Sleep now,” advised Charlie, rolling himself in his blanket and dropping off at once. The others followed his example and this night Stanley slept soundly.

In the morning Charlie prepared the breakfast as usual and then stalked into the woods.

“After fish?” inquired Stanley.

“No, he’s going back to Rangeley,” informed Bub.

“When did Abner tell you?” wondered Stanley.

“He didn’t tell me,” snickered Bub. “Don’t you see Charlie has his rifle and blankets?”

“He’s going to deliver a message to the wangan man,” supplemented Abner. “I want Hatton to know about the cut on the public lot in Bill town. He’ll send men up here to carefully estimate the stumpage. While they are doing that and attracting Nace’s attention we’ll slip over and look at our lines; or rather,



try to find our lost line, run more'n a century ago."

"When do we start?" asked Stanley.

"We'll cruise Mt. Jim till Charlie gits back, then we'll push right through," said Abner.

Both the boys missed Charlie keenly; Stanley more than Bub, perhaps, as it was his first experience in the woods. He had learned to depend upon the silent Indian and feel no apprehension while near him. Abner, too, missed him, but in a different way. He missed the cooking. He did not take kindly to what he and Bub called "squaw" work.

On the first day after Charlie's departure Abner was content to remain in camp, preparing the packs and studying his maps. This allowed the boys considerable leisure and resulted in Stanley learning a valuable lesson.

He had wandered about a half a mile from the shack and had succeeded in seeing a lynx chasing a rabbit and this incited a conviction that he was rapidly becoming a woodsman, Bub's discouraging opinion to the contrary. Near the base of a towering ledge, carpeted in front with dead trees, blown down from their meager root-hold, he came upon a low dark opening. He might have passed it if not for a strange whimpering, whining noise.

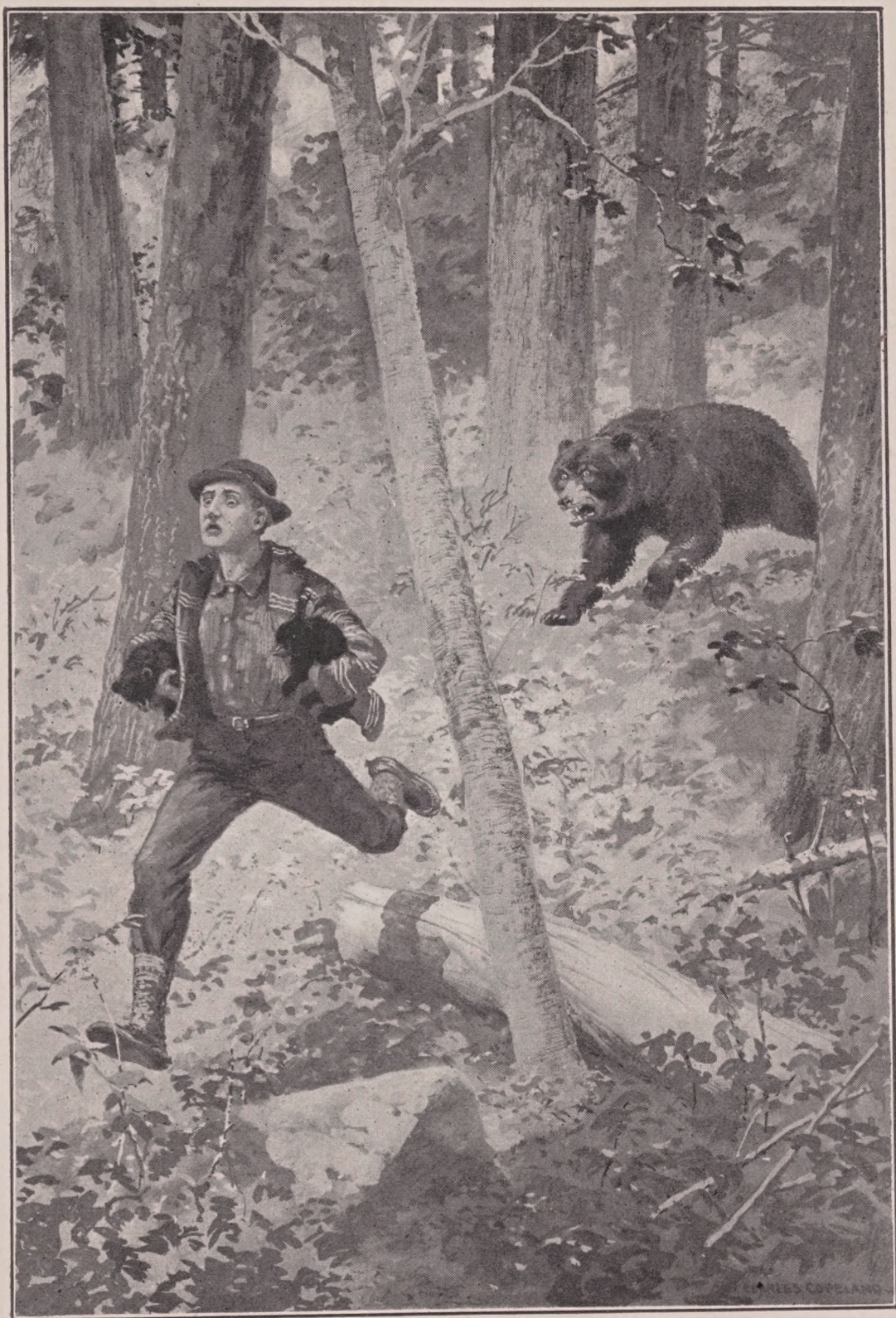


He smiled as he remembered his first experience with forest sounds and unhesitatingly approached the spot. What was his surprise and joy to see inside the hollow rock two little balls of fur. His bosom swelled as he pictured Bub's envy of and Abner's pleasure at his woodsmanship. Just what they were he was undecided. He observed the eyes, barely open, were like little blueberries, and the pointed nose caused him to suspect they were coons. For Bub in describing that animal had sketched out on birch bark his portrait. And yet they were different.

"Probably lots of kinds of coons," he murmured. "They're awfully cunning, anyway, and I'll take them where they'll be warmer."

He had proceeded only a few rods in the direction of the camp, however, when he was startled by a snarling roar behind him. He wheeled and beheld a large, gaunt black bear making towards him with unsuspecting swiftness. For a second he was paralyzed; the next found him running for life over the prostrate tree trunks and rocks with the lumbering brute behind him growling in fury and gaining fast. He dared not look back, for fear of tripping and falling and could only gauge the distance





He dared not look back







between him and his pursuer by the increased volume of the animal's rage.

Nor did he drop his prizes. Even in his frantic haste to escape he told himself it would be cruel to drop the warm little bunches of fur for the bear to destroy. But as he reached the edge of a denser growth, consisting of alders and young birch he found it necessary to abandon one of the babies. With a pang of regret he stooped low and gently dropped it. His throat was parched and burning from the unaccustomed exertion, but he maintained his pace till he found a small opening in the thicket that promised easier traveling.

Plunging into this he was dismayed to come upon a small stream which he must cross. He feared it marked the beginning of a swamp and that on softer footing he would lose headway. Behind him, now much nearer, thundered his implacable foe. With a groan of despair he dropped the other infant and with both arms free cleared the brook, slipped on the further side, regained his balance, and with the hot breath of his Nemesis almost at his back made a heart breaking effort to increase his lead.

On and on with the enraged grumble ever drawing nearer he raced, clearing obstacles in a manner that would have won him much ap-



plause on a hurdle track. But at last exhausted nature rebelled, and with a low moan of despair he fell over to the ground, face downward.

Then he believed it was all over as the bushes crackled behind him. He turned his head and to his great joy beheld Abner.

“O Mr. Whitten, look out!” he gasped. “It was chasing me. It’s upon us.”

“If I had a good ash stick I’d larrup ye so’s ye’d remember it to yer dying day,” cried Abner, his voice choking with anger. “Of all the trying simpletons I ever met ye are the worst. Git up and see if ye can drag yerself back to the camp.”

Painfully Stanley struggled to his feet, casting a frightened glance over his shoulder. The cruiser’s stormy reproach sounded very sweet in his ears. He was saved.

“Where is it?” he whispered, keeping close to Abner’s side.

“It’s toting its cubs back to the den,” gruffly replied Abner.

“What was it, a bear?”

“It was a bear,” exploded Abner. “Now what did ye mean by snooping around her den and stealing her newborn cubs?”

“Were they her cubs?” asked Stanley. “I



thought she'd kill them if I dropped them. I thought they were some kind of a coon."

"I might have suspected it," cried Abner. "If there is room to make a fool mistake I guess ye can be trusted to come along and take advantage of the opportunity."

"I thought you'd like them," meekly apologized Stanley.

This but added fresh fuel to Abner's wrath, and he exclaimed, "What in tarnation should I want two bear cubs fer?"

"I supposed you'd like to have them to keep and make pets of," politely responded Stanley.

Abner stopped short in his tracks and wheeling Stanley about grimly inquired, "Young man, where'll ye have yer body shipped when some fool monkey-shine like this results in yer death?"

"I'm sorry," mumbled Stanley. "I didn't mean any harm. And I'm awfully obliged to you for saving my life."

"Ye can thank yer stars that I was on the ridge and see ye start to run. Even then ye'd been mauled to death and me too, prob'ly, if the bear hadn't give up the chase to go back to her cubs; fer I didn't have any gun."

"Please don't shoot her," pleaded Stanley.



“She isn’t to blame and the babies need her. But I’m awful thankful to you.”

“Drop that,” tartly commanded Abner. “I owed ye that one for pushing me away from the saw. But remember this, I sha’n’t always be handy to pull ye free of danger. I don’t see where ye got together so much ignorance.” And he rubbed his brow in perplexity.

“Nor do I,” sighed Stanley. Then brightening and his eyes dancing with mischief as the shack dawned in sight, “But could you take the elevated at Franklin Square, go to Second Avenue, make Union Square and catch the up-town express in the subway?”

Abner paused and scratched his head thoughtfully. “I’ve been on the Magalloway hundreds and hundreds of times and have camped several times on the ’Sipoway. But I never did any cruising along the Subway. But I’ll say this, that even if I was a stranger in them parts I wouldn’t go to stealing cubs or interfering with a man’s logs and making a fool of myself. I’d just set tight and wait till I learned the ropes. That’s what I expect ye to do up here.”

Stanley suppressed a smile at Abner’s interpretation of New York’s underground railroad, but was satisfied to drop the question. Abner



was not, it seems, for on meeting Bub he told him all about it, adding much of detail that was strange to Stanley.

“Won’t Charlie be tickled to hear it,” cried Bub, smacking his lips. “To think of a man taking his life in his hands—and getting away with it.”

“Please don’t tell him,” begged Stanley. “Abner won’t and I don’t want him to think any worse of me. Goodness knows my mistakes have given him a very poor opinion of me already.”

“I’ll keep a close mouth,” grinned Bub. “But you’re wrong about Charlie. He admires you for your greenness. He says he never saw anyone who could make so many mistakes in so short a time. You’re a revelation to him.”

“Let him be content with what he already knows,” urged Stanley.

Bub nodded good-naturedly and caught up his rifle.

Abner raised his brows in mute inquiry. “Going after the bear,” informed Bub.

Stanley glanced at Abner, his eyes pleading.

Abner cleared his throat and diverted his eyes as he shortly said, “Guess I need ye



'round here. Let the bear go. When I want her killed, I'll do it myself."

"But you promised me I should shoot the next one," reminded Bub, much surprised.

"I know, I know. And so ye shall when we git one that's ready to be shot," testily replied Abner. "But it seems yer friend has struck up a friendship with this partic'lar bear and wants her let alone. He's so fond of her he goes over and visits when he oughter be catching trout fer supper."

"If you'd seen the cubs," cried Stanley. "Why, Bub, they are the cutest little things you ever imagined. Abner promised he wouldn't harm the mother as the cubs need her. She has done nothing a human mother wouldn't have done. I am the one in fault."

"Of course if you put it that way I'll have to let her go," sighed Bub. "But bear pelts are worth something, Mister Malcolm."

"And I'll make it up to you at double the value of her pelt," eagerly promised Stanley.

Bub grinned and Abner winked slowly. Stanley flushed to his ears and mumbled, "I forgot. It may be some time before I can square it off."

"That's better," said Abner. "Never promise what ye can't do."



Bub, relenting and wishing to spare his friend, began asking a volley of questions as to what would be the morrow's programme.

"We'll start at sun-up and make the east jog of Mt. Jim," said Abner. "Don't know how long we'll stay there. Ordinarily I could put three weeks in to profit in making that particular cant; but as things be I shall put in a day or two, drop in to see the fire warden on top of Hood mountain and then go on north to where the real business awaits me. It all depends on how soon Charlie overtakes us."

"Can he find us?" incredulously inquired Stanley.

"He can," was Abner's dry response. "If we kept going three hundred miles up north of Quebec where they're putting in big pulp mills Charlie would follow close enough to cook our second supper, I guess. I vum! I wish he was here now to fix them fish."



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### OFF FOR MT. JIM

ABNER led the way next morning, the two boys keeping some twenty feet behind him. The canoe had been concealed where it would be safe from thievish hands and Stanley was now called upon to carry a heavy pack over exceedingly rough ground.

“I’m glad Big Nick has left us in peace,” he confided to Bub, as he tried to imitate his friend’s easy gait.

“Abner said that to make us feel comfortable in our minds,” informed Bub. “Big Nick is ahead somewhere and that’s why Charlie was sent back. If we had only Mt. Jim to do Charlie would have stuck along with us and held Nick off. But there’s something important afoot and Abner can’t waste time on Jim. I figure our trip there is largely a bluff, just to mislead the enemy and that Abner doesn’t want to run any risk of being interrupted in the really important work. If Charlie gits word through, some of the poplar peelers will



be hustled up here to cover our retreat and act as reinforcements, you see.”

“How far could we go in a straight line and not leave the woods?” asked Stanley, curiously.

“Way up into Canada, and then some,” returned Bub. “About two-thirds of Maine is wilderness land, you know.”

“Will it ever give out?”

“If they don’t follow the example set by our company it will,” he assured. “Our company cuts, so as to make a perpetual investment, taking so many feet a year and above a certain size. Of course we have to cut smaller stuff than they did in the old days, when one giant pine might in falling spoil what to-day would be a half a dozen rattling good trees. If they begin on Mt. Jim this winter it may take anywhere up to ten years to finish it, according to how Abner finds the timber to run. Then in twenty-five years more it will be good cutting again. But we won’t butcher any and everything the way some operators do. Take an individual and he figures he has but one chance at the woods and he intends to get—notice I say ‘get’ instead of ‘git’—his and let the next generation go without. Our company is in business to stay. A hundred years from now



the company expects to be engaged in lumbering. And each year sees the timber run into more money. Why, we have one section, a square mile, you know, that was bought in thirty or forty years ago for thirty-five thousand dollars. Abner says the company has refused a million for it since. Some increase, eh?"

"So, some of the operators cut clean, eh?" mused Stanley.

"Do they cut clean?" cried Bub. "Well, I guess they do. I remember being in Windy Peters' place up near Jackman just after he'd finished cutting on Jim Rawlins' cant. Rawlins is a land-owner and sells his stumpage to operators. It seems Peters made a clean sweep. Well, Rawlins come in, as smooth as could be, smiling and hand shaking and Peters watching him out the corner of his eye. The first thing Rawlins said was, 'You've always used me well, Peters, and I want to be square with you. Now I ain't any objections to your taking a crew and some bush hooks and going over on that cant and getting the rest of the timber.' Meaning, of course, Windy Peters had taken everything but the bushes."

Stanley's lesson was here interrupted by



Abner, who halted at the foot of a hard wood ridge and stared off to the northwest.

"He's watching the smoke and trying to figure it out," whispered Bub as the two youths came up.

"I see no smoke," said Stanley, gazing in vain.

"It's just a yellow haze, but it's plain," said Bub.

"I shouldn't be surprised if it's Big Nick," muttered Abner. Then seeing the youths he frowned, "Don't either of you wander away from camp to-night. I don't like that smoke."

"Big Nick?" inquired Stanley, his hands tightening.

"He's there, like enough, but he never built the fire. There's someone with him who started a blaze when he wasn't 'round to stop it. It died down mighty quick, as if he'd arrived and put it out. Besides, Nick would use wood that wouldn't give off any smoke. That feller used pine."

For the next few miles the trio remained silent. Stanley's gaze was ever focused on the point where his companions had made out the tell-tale smoke and his nerves were keyed up to a high tension as Abner continued to hold his course. As they mounted the ridge and



caught the summit breeze he could see nothing but dark green woodlands stretching to the horizon. The breeze continually rustled the bare branches of the maple and beech, for as yet the belated season had allowed but a few leaves to gladden the deciduous trees, and ever sang gently through the boughs of the evergreens. There was no trace of human habitation, not even a solitary camp, and it seemed as if the three must be alone, surrounded by primeval solitude. And yet somewhere in the northwest was a desperate man, possibly more than one, intent on an evil purpose.

As these thoughts raced through Stanley's mind and as his nerves responded to the suggestion he found himself becoming timid. The danger crept nearer until the immediate boundaries of their course impressed him as containing a hidden foe. A squirrel, suddenly scolding the passersby, gave a prickly sensation to his skin and he started involuntarily.

Abner read his fears and quietly drawled, "Don't git scared. We've got plenty of lee-way. Once we reach the top of the ridge we'll swing due north. That's Jim over there." And he pointed to the rounded top of a distant mountain, masked in the dark verdure of spruce and pine.



“Funny how spruce will grow almost anywhere,” continued Abner, as if talking to himself. “Ye’ll find it where ye’d swear a root couldn’t git a hold.”

“How could you get them down from up there?” asked Stanley, to whom the rugged slopes appeared to be inaccessible to man.

“That’s easy. Sluice ’em down. All ye got to do is to git them started and stand from under. We won’t have to use a hoss except in yarding them down below. Loon River winds around the eastern slope, so it makes it pretty convenient.”

Among Abner’s other assets was an ability to always find a spring when the hour came to stop and lunch. This in itself impressed Stanley as being marvelous.

“Time to eat,” announced Abner, throwing down his pack. “See if there ain’t a spring under that ledge. Two years ago I remember of finding one there.”

“Here it is,” called out Bub. “Clear and full.”

“And if we could put a railroad through up here, build a big hotel and charge five cents a glass people would say it was the best water in the world,” sniffed Abner. “Well, it is good water. Did ye know, sonny, that Maine is sim-



ply peppered with lakes and streams, more so than any other similar area in the United States? That's what gives ye the woods."

Stanley nodded absent-mindedly, for he was engaged in idly lighting some dead leaves under a huge maple. To his great amazement he found himself whirled from his play by one sweep of Abner's powerful arm. Before he could recover his balance Bub dashed by him and in passing gave him a push that sent him headlong into a clump of cedar bushes.

"Say, what do you two mean?" he demanded, crawling forth, his eyes flashing. For he believed the man and youth were suddenly taken insane.

"Hump yerself!" bawled Abner, laying onto the creeping fringe of fire with a bough hurriedly torn from a spruce. "Lend a hand here or I'll leave ye to shift for yerself."

"Come on," barked Bub, his face strained with wrath and fear.

"You'll answer for that Bub Thomas," Stanley choked, overcome by the realization that his supposed friend had placed a hand on him in anger.

"I'll tend to ye soon 's I have time," panted Abner, moving about like a madman.

Not till then did Stanley realize the two were



fighting as he had never seen men fight before to put out the blaze he had so thoughtlessly started.

With an ashamed face he followed their example, stamping and beating the little red tongues that glided here and there like so many serpents. No sooner was one spot extinguished before a patch of red bloomed in another place. The danger zone apparently was the point where the hardwood trees met the black growth. Here it was that Abner fought the hardest. Once the flames entered the tinder like carpet under the spruce and fir no human agency could stop it from spreading along the base of the ridge.

Tearing off a second bough Stanley sprinted to the spring and plunged them into the water. Then he joined Abner and was gratified to find he could kill more fire with one sweep of his weapon than the cruiser could with several blows of his. So fiercely did they labor that at the end of a few minutes only a smoking, blackened area was left to testify to their danger.

"Whew!" gasped Abner, sinking down on the dead cinders and breathing heavily.

"That's why I pushed you," choked Bub, following Abner's example.



“Ordinary man would have clipped ye good and hard,” added Abner. “What possessed ye to do it?”

Stanley, his cheeks two coals, hung his head in dejection. “If there’s a high cliff handy I guess you’d better shove me off,” he muttered. “I was simply curious to see if the leaves were dry enough to burn.”

“Any other experiments ye’d like to try?” asked Abner.

Stanley shook his head. “I’m sorry. Seems as if all I’ve said on this trip is that ‘I’m sorry’ for one thing or another.”

“Can ye think of any more breaks he can make, Bub?” queried Abner anxiously.

Bub gravely shook his head. “The only thing I can think of is to let him carry the rifle and observe if he looks down the muzzle to see if it’s loaded.”

“I don’t blame you two,” cried Stanley. “I ought to have stayed at the mills. I’m not fit to be out alone. Of course I had no idea that I couldn’t stamp out the blaze in a second. It seemed impossible that it could get beyond my control.”

Abner slowly rose to a sitting posture and not unkindly said, “Yunker, I ain’t going to jaw ye; ’cause it’s too serious. I’d carry on



like all tarnation if it didn't amount to much, but this is too serious. Now let's profit by it by making it a lesson to ye. Of all things a man should be careful of in the woods is fire, especially in May and in the fall. Last year a couple of city chaps went out trout fishing at about this time of year. They built a campfire and then left it. Within three days nearly forty square miles of timber had burned. All the timbering operations throughout the years had just made some little open patches on them ridges. Now they are swept clean as a hound's tooth, except where a dead pine remains standing, a roost for crows."

"And that's why the state has fire wardens stationed on all these mountains," added Bub. "What Abner tells you is just one sample. Every spring and fall the sky is heavy with smoke from burning timber. We lose more lumber by fire every year than is cut by man, I guess."

"Have ye noticed that I ain't been smoking since we struck the woods?" asked Abner. Then without waiting for a reply he explained, "It's because I am afraid of fire, as careful and experienced as I am."

"I've learned my lesson," humbly assured Stanley. Then with an irrepressible glint of



curiosity in his downcast eyes, "But what if it had got beyond our control for the moment, what would we have done?"

"Wal," said Abner deliberately, "if it really was beyond our control we'd camped here and taken a nap."

Bub nodded his head in affirmation, but Stanley could hardly believe the statement.

"It's like this," explained Abner; "you fight a fire in the early morning. The minute the fire warden on Hood mountain saw the smoke he'd telephone across to Crooked Hill and then it would be sent north and south and east and west. In each case the warden would call help, and when he asks help to fight a fire every mill owner and operator called upon must send crews. Some sixty or a hundred men would be rushed in here.

"Then they would organize and fight the fire in front, beginning at 3 o'clock in the morning, say, when the blaze is smouldering. The fire always grows with the sun and the wind and the fire-fighting day ends at 10 or 11 o'clock A. M. Then the men go to sleep and rest up for the next morning. If the case is desperate back fires are set at night."

"That means the men in front set a fire and so control it that it can only spread towards



the fire they're fighting," explained Bub. "When the two fires meet the blaze is all over."

"Thank heavens, no damage has been done," fervently cried Stanley.

"A cent would pay for all the stumpage spoiled by this fire," agreed Abner, gravely, "but—"

"But what?" prompted Stanley as the old man paused.

"Wal, I might as well say it, as Bub is thinking it now. We've told Big Nick about what he wants to know. He's seen the smoke and knows I've got some younkers along, for he'd never give me credit with starting a smoke, let alone a blaze."

Stanley's face lengthened. "Mr. Whitten, it seems I have been criminally negligent. I must undo the mischief insofar as I can."

"Ye've been a derved little fool," agreed Abner. "About the other thing I'll hold back my opinion till I know what it means."

Stanley reached forward and clasped Bub's hand warmly, much to that youth's bewilderment. "I'm almost too tired to shake hands," repelled Bub, who began to fear Stanley was not sufficiently impressed with his lesson.



"I know," mumbled Stanley, moving away. "Don't fear that I'll start another blaze."

"Don't bear down too hard on him, Bub," cautioned Abner. "He didn't mean nothing and he took his medicine like a man. After all, who's afraid of Big Nick?"

"I love Stanley," replied Bub simply, "but it's time he got some sense. He needs to be jolted a bit to cure him of doing the wrong thing at the right time."

"I know," mused Abner, "but he had a strange look on his face I didn't like. Better coddle him up a bit."

"I'll call him back and shake hands over again," cried the warm hearted youth, rising and looking after Stanley. "Why! Abner, I don't see him. He can't be lost. Hi! Stanley! Come here! We want you," he loudly called.

A lone crow mocked him from a distance, but there was no other response. Again he called, but Stanley gave no answer.

By this time Abner was on his feet, keenly gazing down the slope. "After him!" he suddenly shouted. "He's making towards Big Nick's camp. He's trying to square himself by finding Nick and saying he's lost and a denying that we're in the woods. Run! run!



That's why he shook hands with ye. Ding his young pelt! Git him. Fetch him back, or I'll larrup ye."

Long before he had finished Bub was flying like a deer down the rough way, ever watching for the movement of the bushes and underbrush ahead and below him. A dry sob clutched his throat as he ran on and remembered how he had disdained Stanley's silent farewell. That the youth would ever use such heroic means to make good his fault had not entered Bub's imagination. Eminently practical himself he was not prepared to understand an emotional nature.

Stanley did not know he was pursued until Bub came close upon him in a diminutive clearing. "Hold on, Stan. Come back," gasped Bub.

"Go back yourself. I'll be along soon," replied Stanley, lowering his eyes.

"You'll come now," cried Bub, springing forward and clutching his arm.

It was in vain Stanley sought to shake him off. "Let me go, Bub. Let me go," he gritted. "I know what I'm doing. Go back."

"Sure, we're both going back," panted Bub, increasing the pressure of his grasp. "It's no use, Stan; you were the stronger in camp, be-



cause you were in the right. But now I can handle a dozen like you. Come on, you proud child." And he yanked with renewed energy.

"Hold him till I git there," called Abner's voice. "Oughter be ashamed to make a old man hurry."

The last was a crafty appeal, for Stanley immediately ceased struggling and went limp. "I'll go back, Bub," he said.

"Your word is good as a million feet of old growth pine, my son," panted Bub, gladly relinquishing his hold.

Abner stopped running when he saw the two walking towards him. When they joined him he was gravely studying the geological formation of the outcropping ledge.

"See that spruce cling to them rocks," he admired, as if nothing had happened. "Ye wouldn't s'pose there'd be room for a tooth pick to git a hold there, would ye? I s'pose the birds scatter most of the seeds of things that grow and it's a case of git along and make the best of the world ye find yerself in, eh?"

Stanley and Bub, arm and arm, proceeded slowly back to the camp, paying no attention to the old man's prattle, while he talked incessantly, endeavoring to restore harmony of thought.



“Here’s the fly agaric,” he babbled. “It’s one of the two poisonous specimens of mushrooms found in Maine. Take it in July and August when the fly is cutting up something disagreeable and put it in water and it’ll kill ’em off. Ye’ll notice the stem is white and a foot tall, with a creamy yaller cap on top. And the cap is spattered with little scales. They say a Czar of Russia once was killed by eating these.”

Still Stanley and Bub sat side by side, looking at their feet and apparently not hearing him.

Coughing loudly to arouse interest he continued, “And here is the only other poisonous specimen. I don’t know the foreign name, but we call it the ‘Death Cup.’ Pure satiny white. Ain’t it a beauty? There’s no cure for the man who eats it.”

The two youths might have been figures of marble, so motionless did they remain.

“Ahem!” sounded Abner desperately. “Have a few of these snow berries. They have a taste of wintergreen and are s’posed to be a little extry.”

Receiving no recognition Abner hurled the berries from him and threw his hat on the ground. “If I’ve got to be in the woods with



a pack of dummies I might as well be alone," he cried.

With one impulse the youths burst into laughter and as quickly rose and shook the old man warmly by the hand.

"Now if ye'll kindly cut out this gossiping we'll go to the foot of old Jim and camp for the night," Abner growled, once the sunshine returned.



## CHAPTER NINE

### BIG NICK PAYS HIS COMPLIMENTS

THE camp was pitched that night at the foot of Mt. Jim, the leanto being put up as before. When Stanley was informed that Kennebago lake was eighteen hundred feet above sea level and the ponds now about them were more than two thousand feet he began to understand why the nights were cold and a fire was necessary.

Abner's preliminary preparations for cruising the east cant of the mountain, or the Dead river watershed, puzzled while interesting Stanley. With the early morning sun the old man produced somewhere from his big knapsack a pair of powerful field glasses and spent some minutes in studying the dark heights above him.

Fascinated, yet diffident, Stanley stood at his elbow, his lips repeatedly framing unspoken questions.

At last Abner lowered his glasses and demanded, "Wal, why don't ye do it?"

"Do what?" stammered Stanley.



"Ask some fool questions," replied Abner, his eyes reflecting his good humor.

"I will," said Stanley. "What are you looking for, bears?"

"Not being out for bears I'm not looking fer 'em," replied Abner. "But I'll add that bear hunters often use glasses when they want one of the varmints. The first to do it was laughed at by the old hunters, but soon the veterans found it was a great saving of time to sweep the ridges of a mountain with a good glass before climbing up its sides in search of bruin. But I was trying to pick out the ridge we will follow. I guess I've got it now."

Bub already had prepared the breakfast and after this was eaten he packed up a parcel of food and strapped his blankets.

"Shall we stay all night on the mountain?" inquired Stanley.

"We'll go prepared to," said Abner. "It'll be easier than coming back here. I sha'n't put in much time on this cant, just waiting for Charlie to overtake us. Now if we're ready we'll start." And picking up his rifle he led the way towards the mountain.

To Stanley he seemed to proceed with no purpose, winding in and out, turning first to the left and then to the right. But had the



youth been stationed in one of the seventy-foot spruces now beginning to line their course he would have observed that the woodsman always turned back towards a certain point and that his detours were made to avoid embarrassing obstacles, such as ledges and wind-falls.

Abner paused and pointed to one of the latter and remarked, "That's the trap that catches the green hunter. See how the wind some time has torn through here, laying the trees flat like nine pins. The swath is a clean cut one, ye'll notice, and the boughs and trunks make a pretty high fence. When ye try to climb over it ye'll find it mighty rough going. Then comes the green hunter and makes the attempt. His rifle he drags behind him, a limb catches the trigger. Bang! and he's shot and sinks down between the trunks and boughs and a searching party may crawl over him, or pass within ten feet of him, and never suspect where his body lies. He's simply marked as disappearing."

On reaching the mountain proper Stanley turned to look down the course they had ascended thus far. To his surprise he could not observe any particular ascent. There was nothing to show they had climbed a foot, and



yet he was muscle-sore from ever plunging upward.

“We are just about to start in,” dryly informed Abner, catching and reading the youth’s surprised expression. “That’s why it’s easy for a man new to the woods to git lost. Every time he turns around he finds the scenery has shifted. When ye start out in the woods always take notice of yer general direction, and first look behind ye and mark the hills and mountains. Of course ye should carry a map such as the government survey turns out. Then, if the country is new to ye, ye should occasionally climb a tree and look back as well as ahead. Each time ye do it the back trails seem changed. A humped back mountain becomes round and the next time it may look square, according to yer angle. But it’s always yer mountain if ye don’t let it git away from ye. See that sharp pointed feller over there? It’s about six miles. Could ye make it to-day if there wasn’t any unusual obstacles in the way?”

“Certainly,” replied Stanley. “I would only have to keep this mountain at my back and my eyes fixed on the one in front.”

Abner chuckled. “The chances are ye would wind up on Round mountain. For after ye’d



gone a half a mile the mountain behind ye, or this one would look entirely different and over its shoulder ye'd see another mountain and then when ye'd face to the front ye'd find someone had sneaked in more mountains, and if ye didn't pay attention to the sun and got to turning round ye'd soon find a dozen mountains to choose from—and ye'd always choose the wrong one."

"But not if you had one of the maps you spoke of," reminded Stanley, smiling confidently.

"The map is good as far as it goes," warned Abner, "but it's drawn on a big scale. Say ye had one of the Rangeleys and started from Umbagog, intending to skirt Moose mountain and strike Upper Dam. Then, say ye veered off to the northwest a few miles and got off the map. Ye wouldn't know where ye was. Ye might blunder 'round a couple of days trying to git back onto the map. Now, give me the hatchet, Bub."

Bub, who had been an amused listener to this dialogue, passed over the small tool and Stanley was interested to note that Abner was making a back-blaze as they ascended a ridge.

After the veteran had chipped some half a dozen trees in passing the youth could not re-



strain himself from inquiring, "Do we follow this ridge to the top?"

"I was waiting for that," chuckled Abner, blazing another tree. "No, not to the top, but as far as we go. Now, ask again."

"Well, I did want to know why you do it, seeing how plain the way is. All you have to do is to keep the black growth in front of you. On each side it is light and one would have to be a blind man to leave the ridge. It would be like quitting the peak of a roof. Couldn't you find your way up without the blaze?"

"Land of sin," cried Abner, "I'd hoped better of ye. Can't ye see I am making a back blaze? No one coming up the mountain can see these signs. They're to be used when we come down, if we want to come this way."

"But if you make a blaze at the stopping point and find that point when you want to return all you've got to do is to descend," insisted Stanley, believing he must be right.

Abner sighed in despair. "Ever come down a strange mountain covered with timber?" he asked.

Stanley replied in the negative and the cruiser continued, "Then never try it unless ye've back-blazed; that is, don't try it unless ye've got lots of time to spare and grub to eat.



For when ye start to come down ye've got an entirely different mountain. Instead of having it open on the sides and the black growth or ledges ahead, to show the slope of the ridge, you have it all open in front and on the sides and ye only know ye are going down. And ye'd prob'ly find yerself on the other side of the mountain when ye reached the foot. Look behind ye and tell me where we come from?"

Stanley did as directed and confidently pointed in the wrong direction. It was difficult for Bub to make him believe he was mistaken.

While Bub was climbing a tree Abner volunteered the information that the townships in this particular range were designated by letters or figures or names. "This is Jim, town 3, Range 1," he said. "Hi, Bub, what do ye see?"

"There's an old burn down to the northeast, just a sea of grey birch and poplar."

"That's right," mused Abner, studying the map. "Come down and we'll see if we can't start in here."

In what seemed to Stanley to be an exceedingly short space of time Bub gave a whoop and Abner in joining him, explained over his shoulder, "He's found the monument."

This boundary marking Stanley learned was



a cedar post, surrounded by small rocks, while in a thirty foot circle the trees had been blazed.

“The section line runs north and we should find a cedar post every one-fourth mile,” said Bub, as Abner plunged into the tangle. “Each post is blazed, of course and it is easy work making the trip around the second, outside the work of walking.”

“It’s easy work when the line is marked as it was run,” grumbled Abner. “But if the posts have been shifted, or the monuments destroyed ye sometimes find yerself in court with a law-suit going ag’in ye.”

But no such drawback was encountered on this cant and after a weary tramp Abner said he was prepared to “make stands.”

“Make stands,” muttered Stanley, casting his eyes about. “Where are your tools? And what would you do with the stands after you’ve made them?”

“You’re the only one of your kind, Stan,” screamed Bub, dropping on a lichen-covered rock the better to indulge in mirth.

“But that’s what he said,” remonstrated Stanley, gazing after Abner, who was striding away with long methodical steps.

“Let’s follow him and see how his carpenter work progresses,” snickered Bub, rising.



Stanley, still puzzled, willingly fell in behind Bub and soon came up with Abner, who stood with head uplifted and slowly revolving on his heel.

He gave no sign of seeing the youths, but muttering to himself started away at a hurried pace, only to slow down to the long mechanical stride. Then again did he look over their heads and moving his lips begin to slowly turn about as he had before.

“Bub,” whispered Stanley,” this is becoming serious. Is he crazy, or is he looking for timber to make into stands?”

Bub's eyes were watery and he placed a finger on his lips to impose silence. Abner shot one frowning glance at the boy's mischievous face and shaking his head and grumbling led on into the forest. For some half a dozen times he went through his peculiar movements and each time did Stanley find his curiosity increasing as well as his fears.

Finally Abner returned to the starting point and peeling a piece of bark from a birch began figuring rapidly.

Finishing he raised his head and pursed his lips in satisfaction. “It will average five thousand to a stand right here. The first fifty trees will figger that easy,” he informed.



“Down below in the big stuff it will go better. It’s safe to say there’s six million in the section.”

“Will you reckon in all the six-inch stuff?” asked Bub, casting a critical eye about.

“We’ll have to, but on the other side we’ll take nothing under ten or eleven inches.”

“All of which is Greek to me,” broke in Stanley. “I know you mean you’ll take everything down to a six-inch diameter here, but why here and not on the west cant?”

“That’s the most intelligent question ye’ve asked in an hour,” encouraged Abner. “We’ll take it down to six inches here because it isn’t firmly rooted and in case of fire it’s poorly protected. Take it on the other cant, that’ll go down Kennebago stream, and a fire wouldn’t have so much of a chance. Then again, the timber over there is in good ground and is firmly rooted. Over here we’ll snake out everything that will go into pulp. In thirty years from now the west cant will be good cutting again; this won’t be. Shows the difference between careful and wasteful lumbering.”

“And how about the next section?” eagerly inquired Bub.

“It won’t go more’n three million if it does



that," regretted Abner. "I'll say that, and I haven't made a single stand there yet. I won't tackle it now, but when I do it'll take a day or two more'n this did and it'll run under three million. We'll find a lot of ledge and a sheer drop into a bog."

Stanley pressed his lips firmly, as he screwed up his courage and then said, "Mr. Whitten, are you now ready to tell me about these stands?"

Bub exploded and Abner even was forced to admire, "I'll say this fer ye, ye're like a bull pup when it comes to hanging on. I was wondering if I'd sidetracked ye. Wal, when I paced off some seventy-five feet in a straight line and stopped and swung my eye 'round in a circle, the same having the distance paced as the radius, I was counting the sizeable trees in that circle. I was making a stand. I was gitting an idea how the timber ran. I took a sparsely growing lot and then a thick growth. Sometimes, if it runs even, five or six stands will tell the story. But if I had time I'd make five times that many on this piece, it being uneven. Of course you divided the total estimate by the number of stands, remember yer acreage and there ye have yer section. I've seen men that could estimate a section down to a



foot of timber—that is, almost.” And Abner chuckled softly over Stanley’s wonderment.

“He’s trying to have some fun with you,” whispered Bub.

“I’m glad of it,” smiled Stanley. “I’m sure I’ve bothered him enough.”

“That is all past now,” warmly declared Bub. “You’re breaking in fine. The bear and the fire told rather against you, but it might have happened to any fellow. I’m positive that for the rest of the jaunt you’ll be more help than you are bother.”

“Thank you,” murmured Stanley, a bit downcast. “But I didn’t know I had been so much of a bother outside of one or two mistakes. I’ve certainly kept up with you and you’ve lost no time on account of me.”

Bub eyed him doubtfully; then frankly said, “I guess you can stand the truth, Stan. If we hadn’t been holding back for Noisy Charlie you’d been a brake on us. Why, my son, if Abner and I were in a hurry to get anywhere how long do you suppose you could keep up with us? Abner is past middle age by quite a lot, but he can walk a moose to death. You’ve picked up weight and hardened your muscles; on the loading gang you probably could give me a tight rub. But when it comes to cruising



you've simply got to learn it, my son. And we'd leave you so far behind you'd think you started out alone. Fortunately we are not in a hurry."

"Is it possible, Bub?" cried Stanley, his eyes wide open.

"It is," solemnly assured Bub. "When we start off just watch how Abner seems to take it easy but still gets over the ground, favoring himself at every step and never wasting a step. Don't watch me, watch him. I'm more wasteful of my strength. Don't you know that you often have to trot a few steps to get up with us?"

"Yes, that is so," slowly admitted Stanley. "I'd not thought of it before, but I remember now you two were always just a bit ahead. I'll watch Abner and profit by it."

The object of the last remark now called them to join him, announcing it was time to return. "We'll go back to camp." Then to Stanley, "It'll give ye a chance to pick up our back trail and see how easy it is to go down the mountain the way ye come up."

Stanley smiled good naturedly and cheerfully replied, "No, Mr. Whitten, it will allow me a chance to learn something that is best learned by experience."



“Stop that mistering me,” grumbled Abner, yet much pleased with Stanley’s frank admission. “Mebbe we can teach ye something after all. Seems if he was improving, Bub.”

“He picks up every minute,” heartily cried Bub, glad to give his friend a boost. “Now for the homeward trail.”

Stanley happened to be the first to find the end of the blaze and as he gazed down the slope he was amazed. It did not seem possible that the white spots on the trees could indicate the path they made in ascending. Where was the ridge they had so easily traversed? Gone. Aside from the blazed trail there was nothing to indicate where they should descend. What seemed to be a ridge led off at different places and split up into other ridges, any of which might be the right one so far as Stanley could determine. It was all open before them; in coming up they had had the black growth to aim at.

“It beats me,” he cried, rubbing his head in perplexity.

“Turn ’round and look back,” suggested Abner.

He did so. “Why, it’s our ridge; the way is perfectly plain,” he cried. And he wheeled quickly as if expecting to catch the ledge as



obviously extending downward. Again it had vanished.

“It is so plain to ascend that you are not blazing the lower side of the trees,” he remarked, on noticing Abner’s hatchet thrust in his belt.

“That’s it,” confirmed Abner. “When we git to the bottom I’ll leave a mark to show me what ridge to take.”

“If you don’t cruise the next section you can’t cut it this fall,” said Stanley.

“Time enough to cut it in the next few years,” replied Abner. “If it wan’t fer fires and windfalls I’d let this go over several years. As it is we’ve got to begin gitting it out. If it wan’t that important I’d not bother with it on this trip.”

“It has only taken a day,” reminded Stanley.

“But I ain’t made my estimates on how much equipment we’ll need, or how many hosses and men we’ll need; or how much can be cut without crowding the Kennebec mills too hard. A cruiser has to keep all those things in mind. What the boss wants to know first is, How big a camp is necessary?”

“This is the end of the trail, and here is the ledge I stood on when you told me to



look across country," proudly announced Stanley.

As Abner paused beside him, gazing out over the spruce and sprinkle of birch, Bub alarmed them by crying, "See, Abner! Look! The smoke!"

"Our camp fire," said Stanley, not catching the import of Bub's excitement.

Abner whipped out his glasses and gazed earnestly for a minute.

"You're overlooking," cried Bub, throwing forward his rifle. "Look right down below us. See that movement in the bushes? It's Big Nick following our trail."

Almost as he finished there came a whip-like report down below the ledge and Bub's hair was fanned by the passing of a bullet.

"Shoot! shoot!" yelled Abner, as a figure of a man, bowed over as it made away, met their eyes. With one accord Bub and the cruiser threw up their rifles and pulled the trigger. But no cartridge exploded. Frantically working the levers the two tried again.

"Not a shot in either gun," foamed Abner.

"Great Scott!" faltered Stanley. "I forgot to load them after cleaning them."

Abner had no time for words. Throwing aside his rifle he sprang forward.



“He’s going to set a back fire,” cried Bub. “Nick has started his at the edge of the swamp, intending to burn up the mountain, not only destroying our timber but our lives. Git busy over by that boulder and start a blaze. For your life don’t let it eat up the mountain.”

It was now near sun-down and the wind fortunately had died out. From the swamp the frightened chorus of animal voices began to be heard, while rabbits, squirrels and several lynx dashed into view, the hunting instinct in the cats and the fear in the others all being lost in the greater fear of that terrible thing—fire.

As Stanley struck his match a noble buck swiftly passed near him, trying to circle the mountain and find water.

Thus the three men worked, trampling and beating out the tongues that sought to creep upward; and meanwhile the yellow cloud in front grew taller and was often punctuated with pillars of red.

“Look out for the ends!” roared Abner, as their efforts finally resulted in a racing streak of opposing flames that promised to rescue them from their pen.

This advice was timely. If the back fire was allowed to creep about the base of the moun-



tain it would eat upward and end in raging at their backs.

Fortunately for them the swamp land in front was crescent in shape, its horns reaching almost to the ledges. The back fire quickly reached the half-breed's conflagration and died down and the ends of the fiery menace were quickly subdued.

"Boys," Abner panted; "ye've had a mighty narrer escape. If it comes nat'ral to ye to say prayers at night, ye'd better throw in a few thanks fer to-day. I'm going to fer one. But by jing! I'd had that Nick if I'd had a bullet. The sight was just between his shoulders."

"Would you have killed him?" cried Stanley in a horrified voice.

"Would I have killed him?" roared Abner. Then speaking very daintily, "O no. I'd write a letter to the city and ask them to send up a policeman to arrest him for burning me up." Then exploding again, "Why, younker, do ye s'pose there's a man in the woods but what would shoot him down like a mad wolf if he caught him trying to burn up timber, let alone trying to burn up men?"

"Well, he failed and I'm glad you didn't kill him," said Stanley.





Thus the three worked, trampling and beating

*See page 163*







“So am I,” grinned Bub through his mask of ashes and smoke. “It will give him another chance to build fires and shoot me.”

“Let us hope he’ll be defeated without any of us killing him,” said Stanley. “Of course, if it came to choosing between him and either of you I’d shoot him myself.”

“Ye’ll do mighty little shooting if ye keep the guns unloaded,” reminded Abner.

“Well, if we ain’t in a pickle,” half-sobbed Bub, glancing quickly and fearfully about.

“What d’ye mean? Speak out!” demanded Abner, shaking him by the collar.

“Don’t you see! Nick has been to our camp. Of course he stole everything he could lay his hands to, including our ammunition. We haven’t a single shot to defend ourselves with. He can pick us off one at a time and run no chance of being hurt. He knows we haven’t any bullets, by our not shooting him.”

Crack! again sounded the whip-like report, and Abner’s hat leaped from his head.

Crack! sounded the half-breed’s rifle for the third time and Stanley felt something caress his hair with a whining noise.



## CHAPTER TEN

### THE PURSUIT

PULLING his young companions from the danger zone on the ledge Abner led the way to the northeast, taking great care to keep under cover.

“It’s no use scouting for ammunition at the camp,” he said. “For if that devil didn’t take all the cartridges they’ve been destroyed by the fire. Lucky we took our blankets and some grub, else we’d sleep pretty cold to-night.”

“Where are we aiming for?” asked Bub, his good-natured face now pale with fear as he remembered Wilson’s warning at the mills—that if Big Nick ever caught him in the woods, where every man was a law unto himself, he would even all scores.

“I want to fetch up Hood Mountain,” said Abner. “The fire warden will have ammunition and once we git that we’ll turn the tables on Mister Nick. But be careful to keep covered. And you,” to Stanley, “do as I do and bend low. If that varmint sees a bush move he’ll plug away at it.”



“Will he follow us?” whispered Stanley, to whom such cold-blooded behavior seemed impossible even in Big Nick.

“Ain’t he tried to kill each of us so far?” returned Abner, talking between his teeth.

“He’ll chase us as long as there is light to follow our trail,” panted Bub. “I wish we could strike some ledge where we’d leave no trail.”

“We can’t take to a ledge till we git a lead on him,” said Abner.

“It is hard work for me to believe he is so bloodthirsty,” declared Stanley, straightening to relieve his cramped muscles. As if to assure him to the contrary a bullet whistled close to his side.

“Keep down and sprint!” commanded Abner, his eyes flaming in helpless anger. “That butcher will chase us till we strike the warden’s. Don’t ye understand his life may be at stake as well as ourn? He intended to have the fire burn us up together with the timber. We didn’t camp up there as he expected when he found we’d taken our blankets and food. We came back before he got things going nicely and discovered him. Then he knew that once we got clear of the woods and told how he set a fire there wouldn’t be a hand in



northern Maine but what would be against him, except as ye allow fer Nace and his gang, what's urging him on in his deviltry. He'd got to stop us testifying agin him; else someone up here would shoot him on sight, or he'd be taken to the settlement and given a long term of years. He must kill us or always keep in hiding. And he knows the Great Northern Lumber and Paper company has a long arm and will spend no end of money to trail him even to Alberta. It's our lives or his life or freedom."

As he flung this chilling information over his stooped shoulder he was rapidly taking a zig-zag course away from the mountain so that he might have more room for his fearful game of hide and seek. More than once as he softly sped along he cast a wistful gaze at the western horizon and prayed for night.

Thoroughly alarmed the two youths hung at his heels, darting along like so many shadows. And each knew that behind them, coming hardly less swiftly, was the bowed form of the half-breed hunter, only now he was hunting men. Far ahead, bathed in shifting shadows at its base, illumined by the setting sun at its top, rose Hood mountain. This was Abner's objective point, but the three knew it could not



be made that night, and each feared that their pursuer would anticipate their purpose and either overtake them or head them off. Again, he could strike his assassin's blow from a distance. All he would need to complete his murderous purpose was a fleeting glimpse of them as they were forced to cross a clearing. It was to lessen his deadly range of view that Abner sought to take advantage of every natural cover and repeatedly warned his young companions to bend low in running.

Twilight now began to veil the forest with thin shadows and Abner sighed in half relief as he noted the gathering obscurity. They were moving noiselessly now and at a much slower pace. Occasionally some wild thing of the wood sounded a faint alarm as it scuttled away from the silent passerby, but beyond this and the natural calls of the evening woods, peace and quiet brooded over the little drama.

The hermit thrush sweetly began a plaintive recital, oblivious of the straining forms gliding by her little home, but Stanley this time had no room in his thoughts for admiration or reverie.

“Ding them birds!” hoarsely complained Abner as some member of the feathered family took fright at the incautious tread of Stanley



and blundered away, leaving a trail of tell-tale sounds.

Somewhere in the rear rang out the clear report of the half-breed's rifle as he caught the direction of the sound and fired on chance.

"Two can play at that game," choked Bub, bending as he ran and picking up a rock. Saying this he paused only long enough to hurl the same far off to the right, where its crashing through a clump of trees deceived the half-breed into firing a shot in that direction.

"Ye can't fool him twice that way," informed Abner. "He knew the second he pulled the trigger that he'd been fooled. Now he'll sprint a little to git nearer and end it."

The last three words caused cold shivers to race up and down Stanley's spine. He recalled Bub's words, to the effect that they would find it exciting in the woods, and he regretted his boastful assertion that no situation could be too intense for him. The job with the loading gang appealed to him now as being exceedingly attractive and even the persecution of Gilvey was softened down to a mild annoyance. How secure had been the boarding-house, how kindly the daily associations at the mill.

"Bub" he groaned, "I'm scared about to death."



"I'm scareder than you are," confessed Bub, with a painful catch in his voice.

"Stop chattering and save yer wind fer running," commanded Abner, suddenly turning into some spruce and darting away at right angles.

For several minutes the three made good time, as the spruce was a portion of a mixed growth, one of those isolated islands of trees that had never known the blow of an axe. Despite the semi-darkness the fugitives could proceed at full speed, the aisles stretching roomy and clear before them. It had one drawback, however; it led towards the northern shoulder of Mt. Jim, and Abner did not care to be penned up against the mountain. Accordingly he soon turned again into the more tangled growth, where if the path was rougher and the pace slower it still allowed of progress in the right direction. If it had been any but Big Nick the veteran cruiser would have lost him long before this. But Nick, like Noisy Charlie, was not to be deceived by the ordinary deceptions of a woodsman and hounded his prey most skillfully.

"Can't we stop and hide somewhere?" panted Stanley, his heart drumming painfully against his ribs.



“Not yet,” replied Abner’s low voice. “We must take every advantage of the darkness. Even Old Nick, let alone his child in the rear, can’t foller us once it gits black. Thank the Lawd the moon won’t come up till about two o’clock in the morning and being a new one won’t give much light.”

A lynx screamed at Stanley’s right and with a smothered cry he leaped violently and with much noise from his course. Almost instantly the quietude of the forest was shattered by the menacing crack of the rifle.

“Do that once or twice more and we’ll stop running forever,” warned Abner, with a sob in his voice. “I heard that piece of lead.”

“We’ve lost all the ground we’d gained,” reproached Bub in a whimpering tone. “He’ll just cut right across and save all the twisting and turning we’ve made.”

“I was startled,” muttered Stanley, pressing a hand to his aching side.

“No matter what happens, ye’ve only got Nick to fear,” warned Abner.

“Let’s stop and hide and pounce upon him as he passes,” desperately suggested Stanley.

Bub exclaimed impatiently, “Do you suppose he’d pass? He’d stalk us as he would a deer and shoot us down from a distance. When we



hide it must be where he won't think of passing."

"Now move slowly and quietly for yer lives," cautioned Abner in a whisper. "Take hold of Bub's hand so ye won't stumble, Reddy, and lift yer feet clear of the ground."

With this warning he began leading the way towards the west, moving with painful deliberation. Stanley, keyed up to the highest tension, suddenly found he had eyes in his feet and no dead limb, or stone, was disturbed by him as he crept along close to Bub.

"He's making for the ledges," murmured Bub.

It was still early evening, and, although the outlines of the surrounding mountains were plainly visible against the sky, darkness now completely smothered the lower stretches of woods and the trio had no fear of detection in walking upright. As Bub had surmised Abner was making for the heaped up boulders that marked the beginning of the mountain. Knowing that it would be impossible to proceed much farther without a breathing spell he selected this rough environment as affording the best hiding place and the most secure retreat if they should be discovered.

Now lichen covered rocks warned them they



had reached the foundations of the gloomy heights above, and moving more by instinct than by any of his senses Abner twisted and turned among the ever growing boulders until he was brought up by a towering ledge. Skirting along the base of this he suddenly halted and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"I've found what I expected, a small cave," he whispered. "Now if there ain't any of Stanley's bears inside we'll take a little rest. Both of ye stand in the opening, 'cause I've got to strike a light, if only for a second. And it won't do to let Nick see a glimmer."

Crowding close behind him to mask the twinkling point of flame the boys waited anxiously. Stanley firmly expected to hear a roar and be run down by an infuriated bear. Since his experience with the cubs he had associated all holes in rocks with gleaming eyes and infuriated black forms.

However, he was now destined to be gratefully disappointed, for immediately after the tiny scratching sound the match was extinguished and Abner invited, "Come in. He couldn't git us in here in a million years. The passage turns almost at right angles and there's just enough room for comfort."

"Then we've beaten him," joyously ex-



claimed Stanley, crowding forward and throwing himself on the rocky floor and indulging in the luxury of stretching out at full length.

“Not so loud and fast,” growled Abner. “He can’t git us in here, but if he knows we’re here we can’t git out. It’s like being cornered in a checker game, when ye have the double corner and t’other feller has a king and ye keep moving back and forth. Only, it’s worse, ’cause we’ve got to git out.”

“But why can’t we stay here till he gets tired, or believes we have escaped?” protested Stanley.

“Water,” briefly replied Abner.

“It’s only a matter of hours when you’d face all the Nicks in the woods for the sake of getting a drink,” supplemented Bub, gloomily.

“I was hoping we could remain,” lamented Stanley.

“We must dig out as soon as the moon rises. If Nick is as cute as I give credit fer being, he’ll suspect some such trick and instead of trying to find us in the dark he’ll push right ahead to the foot of Hood Mountain and as soon as it begins to git light will beat back, trying to head us off.”

“Then we’ve let him get between us and our only place of refuge,” muttered Stanley.



“We’ve had to step aside and let him git between and us and the fire warden’s, if that’s what ye mean,” mumbled Abner.

“I never expected to run into anything like this,” declared Stanley.

“My son, you mean you’ve found it exciting enough,” soberly suggested Bub.

“Why! it’s ridiculous,” complained Stanley. “It’s as bad as the old days of Indian warfare. We’ll be scalped the next thing we know.”

“It wouldn’t pay to bother with my head covering,” sourly returned Abner. “But scalping, or no scalping, I’m going to eat. Lawd! what fools we was we didn’t take along more grub.”

Bub unrolled the provisions and by the sense of touch alone enumerated, “Bread, bacon and coffee. We have no water to make coffee with and if we had we would not dare build a fire. I haven’t reached the point yet where I care for uncooked bacon. That brings us down to bread. What would you like for lunch, Mister Whitten?”

“Ye just stop that funning,” growled Abner. “To think of being chased and shot to pieces and not be allowed to eat.”

“I’m waiting to take your order, Mister Whitten,” politely informed Bub.



“Quit, or I’ll larrup ye,” angrily commanded Abner, to whom the need of food now outweighed all dangers. “Gimme a piece of bread.”

“And you, Mister Malcolm?” persisted Bub.

Despite his fears Stanley was forced to smile in a ghastly fashion and reached out a groping hand for his portion of the rations.

“We not only will be shot and die of thirst, but we’ll starve to death,” whispered Stanley to Bub between mouthfuls of the dry crust.

“No woodsman will starve in the woods,” returned Bub in an undertone. “That is, if he is allowed to forage for food. He might starve in the city if he didn’t have any money, but there’s always stuff to eat and keep alive on in the woods.”

“But what if he can’t kill any game or catch any fish?” moodily inquired Stanley.

“Then he can live on rock lichens, or reindeer lichens,” murmured Bub. “There’s lots of nourishment in them. One of the Arctic explorers saved his life by eating reindeer lichens; Franklin, I believe. You’ll find them everywhere in the woods. Rock lichens are on rocks of course. Funny how nature starts in the minute there’s a rock heap and tries to cover it up with lichens. Then after it’s



covered up the mosses creep in and then after they've decayed enough you get a little soil and a bird drops a seed and up comes a tree. Then there's roots and berries in their season, and, O lots of things a fellow can keep a-going on. As for water, a woodsman will find it almost anywhere and if he can't he'll use the Indian cucumber. I was lost a week upon the Musquacook once without any provisions, but I wagged along and didn't lose any flesh to speak of. On the last day, I remember, I knocked over a booby—"

"Can't ye find something besides partridge to gossip about?" groaned Abner. "I vum! to hear ye makes my mouth water so I fergit I'm thirsty. If I was back at the settlement I'd order a hundred dollars' worth of ham'n eggs."

"I'd have a reg'lar hotel dinner," enthusiastically declared Bub. "I'd start in with soup and fish and then have roast beef, rare, with green corn on the cob and all the fixings, same's I had in Portland once, and at the end I'd call for pie and—"

"Quit it, ye young torment! Quit it, or I'll lambast ye. I may be shot by Big Nick, but I vum! I won't submit to being tortured by any younker."



“What was the hardest time you ever had, Abner?” mischievously asked Bub, nudging Stanley.

“It was when I had to make a soup out of a crow,” gloomily replied Abner. “Crows ain’t poison, but they was never intended fer polite fodder. The first day it tasted good, ’cause I was starving. But on the fourth day I begin to git weary of it. And on the fifth—Say, ye young scallywag, didn’t I tell ye up on the Allagash never to ask fer that yarn agin?”

“These rocks are getting hard,” remarked Stanley, now somewhat recovered from his recent exertions.

“Might be a good plan if ye’d spread down yer blankets,” sarcastically observed Abner. “I did.”

Stanley blushed under the cover of the darkness and silently unrolled his blankets. It had not occurred to him to soften his couch by their means.

“If you had a nice fat sandwich I wonder if you’d have to be told to eat it,” snickered Bub.

“I say, quit talking about food,” sternly commanded Abner. “I remember once I went to a circus in Bangor and the hotel people charged me seventy-five cents for a meal and I



ate nothing but pertaters, and pertaters was then selling fer fifty cents a bushel. What d'ye think of that fer a swindle? I went to the feller behind the desk and told him I wanted enough pertaters to make up a bushel'n a half, seeing as how I'd paid seventy-five cents, and he only laffed at me. No circuses or hotels git any more of my money."

Bub chuckled at Abner's inability to abandon the very subject that tortured him to think of. Stanley, less mercurial than the other, remained silent, his thoughts running along the dramatic events of the last few hours. As silence fell on the trio each began to read the story told by the night sounds. To Stanley the chorus was more beautiful than ever, while the wilder and more unwholesome notes failed to incite the old fear. He passed over the shriek of the great horned owl with a frown, as he would try to ignore a discord in an otherwise sweet melody.

To Abner and Bub the night songs and voices were of practical worth. The lynx had missed his prey and was screaming in rage. The porcupine, fearless beneath his panoply of spears, was one of the few wood folks who did not bother to practice secrecy, and the sprawling step and crackling limbs emanated from his nocturnal prowlings and did not evidence the



presence of a bear. The veteran and Bub interpreted each sound with mechanical ease. Then Abner, half rising, touched Bub lightly.

Bub returned the signal and held his breath.

“What do you hear?” murmured Stanley in Abner’s ear, his heart renewing its thumping as he sensed the others’ rigid apprehension.

“It’s what we don’t hear,” murmured Abner. “Be absolutely silent for yer life. Something has stopped the birds’ songs.”

Outside, the moon was beginning to scatter a faint glow over the scene. With a warning pressure for them to remain quiet Abner silently made his way to the opening. Then reaching back he touched Bub’s leg. The youth as noiselessly joined him. In front a huge rock cut the sky-line. On top of this was the vague figure of a man.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### STANLEY MEETS THE ENEMY

FOR several moments the man and the youths remained motionless, their eyes focused on the grim silhouette. They had no doubt but what it was Big Nick, and a sinister phase of his pose was the manner in which he held his rifle, as if prepared to shoot at a second's notice.

Gently edging backwards Abner indicated for the youths to follow him. Then he softly whispered, "In some way he is led to believe we turned in this direction. I had expected he'd make for the mountain and try to cut us off in the morning."

"What are we to do?" murmured Bub, all of his good humor deserting him as he pictured the silent form on the rock.

"We'll lie low for a bit, but we must git out of here before the moon crawls any higher," replied Abner.

"Does he know we are near here?" asked Stanley, expecting every moment to have the half-breed creep into the narrow passage.

"He's puzzled," said Abner. "He doesn't



think we are where we can see him, else he wouldn't stand up there on that rock. Yet he believes he is on our trail."

Stanley's teeth chattered at the boldness of his thought, and he said, "Let's sneak out and get near enough to jump him. I'm tired of being chased as if I were a poor wild thing."

"That's it; let's take the lead. He won't be looking for it and we'll never get a chance at him in the day time," urged Bub, whose fears were driving him desperate.

"Younkers, I opine ye've got the right of it. It's now or never," agreed Abner, beginning to steal back to the opening.

But the first stealthy glimpse revealed the half-breed had disappeared. He might be within a few feet of the hiding place, but he was no longer on the rock.

"These ledges will be losing some of their darkness in a little while," reminded Bub, to whom the faintly illumined rock piles appeared to be bathed in brightest light.

"And Big Nick can see like a cat in the night," regretted Abner. "Yas, I guess we'd better be moving. For if he really believes we're hid up 'round here he'll stick till he starves us out. If we can git to the woods we



can worm our way quite a distance before daylight."

"Shall I lead the way?" asked Bub.

"No, sirree! Let yer Uncle Abner take the lead," replied the veteran, slowly thrusting his head from the opening.

Fortunately the ledge at this point was overhanging and no rays of moonlight had succeeded as yet in penetrating to the mouth of the cave. But a few feet from the ledge was an open space of some fifty feet which must be crossed before the ink-like depths of the woods could be gained. The average man would have been able to see nothing in the gloom, but Abner knew Big Nick's keen eyes would ferret them out in a twinkling of the eye should they move carelessly across this danger belt.

His instructions were few and emphatic. He was to lead off with Stanley second and Bub drawing up the rear. Each was to move in keeping with Abner's cautious advance and at the slightest signal from him each was to remain motionless.

The fifty feet seemed to require a century to traverse in Stanley's estimation. Once when about half way of the distance Abner touched Stanley's head and came to a stop. Stanley immediately repeated the signal to



Bub, and the three might have been so many pieces of rock, scattered over the ledge. Stanley felt an almost irresistible impulse to yell out and make one try for the woods. A stick snapped on their immediate left and with painful carefulness Stanley turned his head. He was positive he could detect the glitter of the half-breed's eyes and was as equally sure that they had been discovered. Still Abner made no move forward and Stanley next feared that the thumping of his heart would be heard by the enemy and betray their position. The glittering eyes, in the meanwhile, ascended a tree and the youth knew it was but some creature seeking a refuge like themselves, or else hunting victims like Big Nick.

A second stick snapped, ever so lightly and the three knew it must be Nick's moccasined step. It evidenced one thing to Abner; the half-breed was abandoning some of his caution, evidently believing his prey was not in that vicinity. Then something like a shadow floated from the spruce, became fixed to the face of the ledge, remained immovable, then detached itself and stole forward.

With a shiver of relief Abner advanced a notch. If they had waited but a few moments they would have been penned up in the cave.



Then the old man began to move more swiftly. He remembered their lunch. Should the half-breed enter their late hiding place he would be sure to discover the bread crumbs. It was absolutely necessary for the three to reach the shelter of the woods before their pursuer emerged from the cave.

The youths quickly caught the old man's thought because of his haste to gain cover. Stanley figured it out only in a partial manner, but Bub was quick to weigh the situation. He pushed Stanley gently to indicate the need of speed, and then tapped him warningly, fearing the inexperience of his friend would divulge their presence. But for once Stanley made no blunders and followed Abner's snake-like movements with the utmost care. Now the leader was half beneath the boughs of a spruce when Bub pressed Stanley's leg as if to halt him. The signal was instantly telegraphed to Abner and the old man promptly abided by Bub's judgment and became motionless. Bub had heard a pebble rattle behind him and knew it announced the approach of Nick.

Stanley's heart pounded fiercely and his lungs seemed to be filled with fire. He sought to hold his breath and then was compelled to exhale. He was positive he had betrayed his



friends to the common foe and hugged closer into the rock and awaited the fatal shot.

But nothing happened, and at last Bub gave the signal to advance, and with infinite care the last few feet were left behind and the three friends found themselves crouching in Stygian darkness.

"He knows we were here but a short time ago," Abner whispered between the two bowed heads. "He knows we couldn't have moved far without making a noise. Remember, a single sound will mean a shot. Now follow me."

With the same deliberation Abner felt his way through the forest. Never once did his foot descend so that even Stanley behind him could hear it. Once their way was blocked by a mass of alders, and Abner retraced his steps towards the foe until both Stanley and Bub began to feel an icy tickling about the roots of the hair.

Fully a half an hour passed before Abner came to a halt and drew them close to him. "I think I heard a rustle off to the left. It might have been some bird, or animal, but I believe it is Nick. If so, he is moving parallel to us and will weave back and forth in an effort to cover considerable territory. I'd strike directly



away from him if not for drawing away from Hood mountain. When morning breaks, as it will very soon, I want to be within reach of it. On the other hand, if we go straight ahead we stand a chance of his catching up with us."

"I say go ahead," whispered Bub.

"My vote is the same," added Stanley.

"All right," murmured Abner. "Ye have a say in it as much as I do. As there ain't any best way it's toss up a cent which is the best thing to do."

"If worst comes to worst we could start a back fire and burn him out," suggested Stanley.

"The very thing," urged Bub, eagerly. "Once we put a wall of flame and smoke between us he will be so busy saving his own bacon that he won't think of chasing us. Couldn't it be done, Abner?"

"It might, if he didn't shoot while we was starting it," admitted Abner; "but these ain't my trees to burn."

"Surely you'd burn them to save our lives," softly exclaimed Stanley.

"I'd burn every one in Maine to save the lives of ye two," assured Abner. "But I wouldn't burn 'em to save my own skin. I ain't got no right to."



“Then you won’t burn them to save mine,” firmly declared Stanley.

“Nor mine,” cheerfully added Bub.

“I’d do it in a second to save ye, only I fear it wouldn’t work,” said Abner. “But let’s leave it be till we see where we’re at. See the East is beginning to show a streak of grey.”

“I can’t see it,” murmured Stanley.

“I can,” said Bub. “Soon you’ll hear some birds sound the first morning note. Then the whole chorus will break out, and then up comes the sun and along comes old Nick.”

The unexpected finale caused a flicker of a smile on Stanley’s set lips and he nodded approvingly at Bub’s undismayed spirit.

Very shortly the eastern horizon took on patches of grey in places, but so gradually that Stanley could not trace the change at first. Then without any warning a shaft of yellow shot through the somber mass and quickly became old gold, as if some giant smith were heating it red hot. Then a fan of glorious radiance flickered to the zenith and the sun was about to say “good morning.”

Taking advantage of the first streak of light Abner wheeled slowly about to get his bearings. He frowned at discovering he had wan-



dered outside of his intended line of approach and must beat back would he reach the warden's abode before nightfall.

"Why not let us separate, each making for the top of the mountain," suggested Stanley, lowering his eyes.

"What is the matter?" asked Abner suspiciously.

"Why do you stand on one foot?" demanded Bub, giving him a twirl.

"By jing! he's sprained his ankle and is trying to git us to go and quit him," savagely announced Abner.

Stanley tried to defend himself, saying he knew he could make the mountain as quickly as either of the others, and concluded by declaring his ankle hurt him only a little. Abner apparently heard nothing that he said, but, forcing him to sit, quickly removed the high boot and examined the sore member. To his great joy he found it was only a minor strain and ripping a strip from his blanket soon had it bandaged in workman-like manner.

"There! that'll last till we reach the warden's if ye favor it," pronounced Abner. "And don't suggest any more of these self-sacrificing games agin. I expect ye two to stick by me and ye must expect us two to stand



by ye; else there ain't no truth in the woods and no good in a woodsman."

"Lean on my shoulder as much as you can," invited Bub. "Now let's put the best foot forward."

This time Abner made the youths lead the way while he brought up the rear. He knew the danger was behind them and he trusted to Bub to pick a quiet trail now that the morning light was filtering through the trees to help them. And as Bub had said the full galaxy of forest singers now tuned up and broke into one marvelous harmony in which, unlike the evening festival, naught but love notes were heard.

But even with the dawning light the fugitives' progress continued slow, Stanley's ankle acting as a brake on their flight. Each knew that the half-breed was taking two steps to their one and must soon be abreast if not in advance of them. Once he reached high ground and scrutinized the low lands with his keen gaze he could not fail to detect their approach, while to intercept them would be an easy task.

The fatigue of the previous day and night was beginning to tell also on Abner's hardy frame. The average man of his years would think only of taking his ease and it was a won-



derful accomplishment in the city bred boy's estimation that the veteran could so long defy exhaustion and set the pace for the elastic Bub. Incidentally, it was another lesson for him to ponder over—what nature can and will do for those who do not desert her.

As he became dulled to the danger ever dogging their heels Stanley found himself admiring the autumnal effect presented by the reddish glow on scattered maples, now half in bud. Isolated patches of hard wood trees were ever giving an atmosphere of October to the landscape, only to be contradicted at the next step by the delicate light green of birch and elm.

“Hi! go 'round the knoll; not up over it,” warned Abner in a low voice, as Bub was mechanically breasting a slight rise.

Bub blushed at the rebuke, for like Stanley his wits had been deadened by weariness and familiarity with the situation.

“I don't think he's behind us,” he feebly defended, but obeying the old man's order.

“Wait a minute and we'll try and find out,” muttered Abner, creeping to the top of the knoll and cautiously gaining a coign of vantage. After a few moments he softly invited, “Crawl up 'side of me, but keep low. Now



watch that small opening back there and look sharp."

The youths did as directed, the small area being dimly discernible. With straining eyes they looked, until Stanley could imagine all sorts of forms and figures crossing the little glade. Then all three were cast in a rigid mould as a dark blotch swiftly crept from cover to cover.

"Come," said Abner briefly. "I was hoping he was farther to the west. In looking back I picked out that opening as the one spot where he might show up if he was directly behind us."

Gritting his teeth Stanley sought to forget his lame ankle and resolutely accommodated his steps to the now rapid advance of his companions. Hood mountain seemed as far away as ever and the youth knew that under the most favorable circumstances its summit could not be conquered till afternoon.

"Let's have a drink," said Abner, leading the way to a bubbling stream.

Several precious minutes were spent in this refreshment but each felt new strength as he rose to continue the journey.

Then Stanley forgot about his ankle, his whole system seemed benumbed and he stalked



along with the mechanical gait of an automaton. He gazed neither to the right or left, nor did he hear the matutinal chorus about him. It seemed as if he was walking in a dream, the forms of his two companions being vague and unreal. Nor did he sense any fear.

Abner was quick to observe his condition and nudged Bub slyly. So long as the youth could walk, so long would they lead him along, but the veteran cruiser had seen men walk like this before, after being lost in the woods, and he knew what the result must be.

It came suddenly. Stanley dropped in his tracks and while not unconscious was thoroughly indifferent to the pleadings of his friends.

For nearly an hour the three remained in the covert, waiting for him to emerge from his lethargy. Finally he seemed to sense that he was holding the others back, and, shaking himself, advised, "You two go on ahead. It's the best thing for all of us. I'm done up and must rest. If you leave me you can make the warden's in double quick time, procure some ammunition and come back for me. Nick couldn't find me in a year. "I'll just remain quiet and rest."



"We can't leave you," whimpered Bub.

"It's the only way you can help me," stoutly insisted Stanley.

Abner rubbed his chin thoughtfully and was silent for a few moments. Then to Bub's surprise and Stanley's joy he decided, "It's the only thing to do. Nick will pass him by. We'll blaze our trail with a little noise so he'll follow us on the trot; then we'll race him for the mountain. And once I git my hand on a cartridge—Wal!"

"Do you want my knife?" asked Bub, hungry to do something for Stanley.

"No; cut me a stout cudgel," replied Stanley.

"I'll fix ye a daisy," said Abner, assailing an oak bough. This he deftly trimmed into a formidable club and then shaking Stanley's hand turned abruptly away.

"I hate like sin to do it," sobbed Bub. "Why can't I stay with you?"

"No! no! If you would help, go," urged Stanley. "If Nick caught a glimpse of Abner making it alone he would know we two were back here. If he sees the two he will take it for granted I am with you, or near you. Believe me, Bub, I run less danger than you do."

A low whistle from Abner warned Bub he



must be going, and silently wringing his friend by the hand he darted silently away.

Stanley's resting place was an ideal one for concealment. A circle of stunted growth completely masked his bed of moss, and one might pass within two feet of him and not suspect his presence. With a sigh of relief he turned his back towards the rising sun and closed his eyes. He could not tell what aroused him; it could not have been a noise, he dreamily told himself, and yet some influence had jolted him from a dreamless slumber. As his wits cleared he was conscious of a feeling of fear. He remained motionless and sought to interpret it. He had read of people becoming uneasy when stared at by unseen eyes. It was like that, and yet different. He did not feel as if someone were watching him, but he did sense an immediate danger. His inner self had warned him to mount guard against some evil.

It seemed as it must be at his very side and it was with much quaking and apprehension that he slowly turned his head and swept the circuit of his small retreat. He was alone.

He sighed softly in relief and then began to believe that the danger must be just on the other side of the bushes. He even picked out the point from which the evil influence seemed



to radiate, and with the utmost caution moved his head in that direction. The boughs effectually screened the outside world, except as his head, resting on the moss, allowed his feverish eyes to peer out beneath them. Within a few inches of his nose were a pair of moose-hide moccasins, but not like those worn by Noisy Charlie. As one fascinated he stared at the immovable footgear. Then he closed his eyes, fearing the impact of his gaze would arouse the owner of the feet into a realization that one of his intended victims was near.

There was something so sinister in the absolute quiet of the figure outside, something so animal-like in its suspicious rigidity, that Stanley knew the half-breed sensed his presence but did not know where to look for him. Something certainly had stayed his pursuit of Abner and Bub. Some sixth sense, perhaps possessed by aboriginal people as well as animals, was telling him he was not alone in that little space. And Stanley held his breath till it seemed his lungs would burst.

Possibly his deep exhalation might have revealed him to his enemy if the half-breed had not changed his position just as the pent-up air was released. Then the youth opened his eyes and gazed again. As Nick shifted his



position Stanley could now see up to his waist, his view including the butt of the rifle resting under the right arm, as the barrel lay in the left hand, ready for instant use.

Edging back Stanley noiselessly rose to a sitting posture and grasped his club. As desperation gave him a false courage he found himself desiring to meet the climax and have it over with. He felt as if he must give a loud cry and spring forth and grapple with the bronzed figure. He mechanically recalled how in his childhood, when playing hide and seek, his nerves got the best of him in his hiding place and he would rush into the arms of the seeker before his retreat had been suspected. He felt the same impulse now and bit his lip in holding himself back.

At last as the tensivity of waiting grew upon him he gradually rose to his feet, forced to stand only half erect that his head might escape the roof of his bower.

A furious anger began to fill his heart, incited by fear. He was like a lynx cornered, desperate enough to face any odds, and his fingers grew benumbed as they strained in clutching the cudgel.

Although his movements had made no noise that he could sense Nick whirled about quickly,



his eyes flaming as they swept each bush and tree. Something was warning the half-breed that he, too, was in danger, and he raised the rifle to shoot.

With a wild desire to know the worst Stanley gently picked a pencil from his pocket and taking advantage of an opening in his roof flipped it upward and outward. In striking it made a slight sound, and as quick as a flash the half-breed fired in that direction.

With a maddened roar Stanley leaped from his hiding place and before the half-breed could shift his weapon the heavy club descended and knocked him staggering into the bushes. Then, yelling loud in his frenzy Stanley dashed away in the direction taken by his companions. It was not until he had covered a half a mile did he realize he had lost the opportunity of disarming his foe.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE RESCUE

UNHAMPERED by Stanley the veteran and Bub exercised all their knowledge of woodcraft and held a bee line for the mountain. The very fact that they had been compelled to abandon their companion led them in a degree to cast caution aside and hasten on at top speed to obtain ammunition so that they might return and rescue him. Occasionally Bub ascended a tree with the agility of a squirrel and verified their course. In the black growth this spying out of the land was absolutely necessary, as Abner was intent on striking the mountain at a particular ridge.

After hours of nerve racking work the two came to the first stage of their ascent.

“Go on ahead,” panted Abner. “Ye’re fresher’n I be. Git the cartridges and come back and meet me. I’ll be loafing along here somewhere. Leave yer rifle with me—and scoot!”

Tightening his belt Bub flashed up the ridge, leaping along as if fresh at the task. Abner



groaned aloud in sympathy with himself and dropped on a bed of moss at one side.

In an amazing short space of time, considering the distance covered, Bub bounded into view, waving his hands in exultation.

"Gim'me 'em!" snapped Abner, clawing hungrily for the cartridges. Then as he rapidly slipped them into the magazine of both guns he threw back his shoulders and became a new man. The hunted look vanished from his eyes and his mouth straightened in grim determination.

"Now," he hoarsely announced, slouching his hat forward, "we'll pay a call to Mister Nick and we'll present a card for every one he sends to us. Come on, my son."

"If he has hurt Stanley, I'll kill him," savagely declared Bub.

"Quit that!" sharply directed Abner. "'Course he ain't hurt him. He ain't even found him. Why! if he has hurt him I'd foller him to Alaska. Now, double quick, or we won't git to him before night."

"We won't be able to return to the warden's to-night after finding Stanley," said Bub, breaking into a trot and moving as if it were his first journey in days.

"We don't want to," replied Abner. "Now



we're loaded we can go where we will and stay as long as we will. But it's mighty lucky the warden's ammunition fits our guns. Else we'd had to borrow his and have only one between us."

"He's worried about Stanley and will run a lantern up into a tree, so's if we want to come back we can hit the trail easy," informed Bub.

"That Reddy is a good boy," mused Abner. "Most fellers would have took on and gone crazy at the idea of being left alone out there. But he was the first one to suggest it. He may be green, but he's got lots of grit."

"I like him," said Bub simply.

The next few miles were covered in silence, the steady dog-trot being interrupted only as Bub paused to climb a tree. On these aerial excursions he not only made sure of their course but he also keenly examined the country ahead in an effort to locate the half-breed. In this quest he was much aided by Abner's field glasses.

The last tree he climbed caused Abner to wax impatient. "Going to stay up there all night?" he sharply inquired.

"Wait! wait!" murmured Bub, his voice trembling with excitement. "Great Scott! Here they come!"



“Who d’ye mean by ‘they’?” hoarsely cried Abner, throwing forward his rifle and fingering the lever nervously.

“It’s Stanley, and he’s running like mad!” shouted Bub, sliding down the trunk with reckless haste. “And a quarter of a mile behind him is Big Nick, his face covered with something like blood.”

“Are they aiming this way?” choked Abner, tearing down a slope.

“Yes,” replied Bub, “but we’d best separate so as to bring them between us. I’ll branch off to the right.” Suiting his action to the word Bub turned at right angles and put several rods between himself and Abner before continuing his onward flight.

Then both were horrified to hear the half-breed’s rifle explode thrice with venomous sharpness.

“The dirty hound is shooting at him,” wailed Abner, straining to increase his already swift gait. “O if he should hit him when we are so near. Shoot, Bub! Shoot! Let him have it the first sight ye git of him, and aim to kill!” yelled Abner, his voice sinking into a snarling sound as he plunged onward and found no elevation from which he could command a view of the race.



His mouth relaxed as Bub's rifle rang out, for he knew the youth had caught a glimpse of the enemy. Then he came to a hillock, spruce covered, and for the first time was able to take in the situation at the front.

Stanley was running through a fringe of hard wood growth, while the half-breed perilously near was dodging from side to side to get a line on him. Stanley seemed to appreciate the other's purpose, for he repeatedly leaped aside from a straight course, seeking to put as many trees between him and Nick as possible. The half-breed apparently had paid no attention to Bub's shot, or else in his lust to kill had not heard it.

"Dodge into the spruce!" yelled Abner, forgetting that the fugitive could not be expected to hear.

But if he could not reach Stanley with his warning he could convey a message to Big Nick. Taking deliberate aim at the bobbing figure he pulled the trigger. Almost at that moment the half-breed half stumbled and this mishap doubtless saved his life. As it was the bullet grazed his head, and with the quickness of a fox he dropped from view. Stanley raced on, now grasping the situation.

A puff of smoke told of Nick's hiding place as



he made one last attempt to reap his vengeance. Instantly Bub's rifle spit out a round of shots, coming so rapidly that the first explosion seemed to blend with the last. At the same moment Abner exhausted his magazine with similar rapidity, and there was no further response from the common target.

Only pausing to reload Abner and Bub advanced to intercept Stanley. When the latter broke through the last barrier and beheld them, a smile spread over his distorted features and he crumpled up over a fallen tree trunk.

"Loosen his shirt and fan him," commanded Abner. "I'll go on and cruise for the Injun. Stay here till I come back."

For several moments Stanley remained with his eyes closed, breathing spasmodically. Then he gasped, "Much obliged, old man. I was about played out."

"Don't talk. Just breathe," directed Bub, his eyes moist with pity. "When Abner gets back you can tell us all about it. But till then take it easy. And, my son, I think you'll agree that we've had several miles of real old fashioned excitement."

Stanley nodded his head and tried to grin, but could not muster quite enough energy. Neither spoke until nearly an hour had passed,



when a step was heard in the immediate front.

“Who is it?” cried Bub, bending forward, his rifle half raised.

“Abner! Don’t shoot,” cried the old man.

“All right, Mister Whitten. Advance and give the countersign,” humorously replied Bub.

“Where’s our friend?” murmured Stanley.

“Ye ought not to have any friends,” complained Abner. “What in sin possessed ye to keep in that hard wood growth fer? Didn’t ye know it was giving Nick a fine bead on ye, with the leaves only half out? Why didn’t ye dig into the spruce? I vum! If I’d know’d ye was so tarnation foolish I’d just kept on to the warden’s and e’t my supper. As fer Big Nick, I couldn’t find him.”

Stanley rose on his elbow and silently shook the old man’s hand, his eyes beaming his thanks.

“Ye can’t soft soap me that way,” gruffly informed Abner, still retaining his hand. “Bub knows I told him that I’d bet ye wouldn’t have enough sense to stay hid, but would come a mooning along and trying to git killed. Bub will remember what I said. I said ye’d be up to just such a fool trick and that we’d better camp with the warden, git our sleep and fod-



der and take our time to-morrer in coming back here fer the remains. Bub will—”

“But Bub doesn’t,” grinned that individual. “Why! Stanley, he cleared eighteen feet at every jump in hiking back here to find you.”

“Wal, we both was a-coming some,” grinned Abner, now openly patting Stanley’s hand. “But, tell us, younker, how the varmint came to jump ye? If I’d thought he was to find ye I’d stuck along and took a chance.”

Stanley then recited the incidents of his slumber and awakening and of his terror in finding Nick’s moccasins near his face.

“Then I remembered how you threw a stone to one side and got him to shoot in the direction of the sound and I did the same trick with my pencil. The minute he fired I let out a yell—and I was awfully scared I am free to admit—and letting out a horrible yell I dashed at him and struck him over the head with the club. It seemed a cold-blooded thing to do, but it was that or nothing. He went back into the bushes as if he’d been hit with an axe, but I didn’t have sense enough to try for his rifle. I think I must have been a bit crazy, for the next thing I know I was running like mad trying to stop screaming. I don’t know how long or how far I raced before realizing what was the matter.



Once I got control of myself I proceeded with more caution. But I was about to drop when he fired the last time. That spurred me on. Then came a shot as I thought in front—”

“That was mine. I saw the bushes wriggle and let drive to take up his attention,” proudly informed Bub.

“Well, I hardly dared hope it was either of you. I thought my ears must be playing tricks on me. Anyway, I couldn’t have gone many rods farther when Abner and you gave the grand fusillade. That spurred me up wonderfully.”

“And ye had the nerve to clash with Nick and clout him with the club!” admired Abner, now holding Stanley’s trembling hand in both of his. “O why should a half-breed’s skull be so tough, and why didn’t ye finish him! And to think ye dared jump him! To think ye had brains enough to remember the decoy trick and draw his fire! And to think ye realized it was all necessary before lamming him! Red, I’m proud of ye.”

“But, Mr. Whitten,” remonstrated Stanley, reddening beyond the tinge caused by his exertions; “I did nothing except what I was forced to do. I deserve no credit. I was desperate because I was cornered. I had to do it.”



“No, ye didn’t,” denied Abner, loudly and shaking his head emphatically. “If ye’d been like most city chaps ye’d tried to steal away and got plunked, or ye’d remained quiet till he found ye. But when ye took him by surprise ye had a second’s advantage. And let me tell ye, younker, it takes a mighty smart woodsman to catch Big Nick a-napping. Noisy Charlie could do it, mebbe, but I couldn’t. Ye had to be as silent as a angleworm in gitting to yer feet, else he’d catched ye, sure. Guess Nick can hear a watch tick a mile.”

“Then he’ll hear his head ring a good long time,” exulted Bub. “His face was covered with blood. You must have hit him an awful crack.”

“Now it’s all over I feel sort of tired,” admitted Abner. “Seems if I hadn’t ate fer a week or slept fer two. Let’s git a little nearer to the ridge and camp fer the night.”

“I can go up to the warden’s and fetch down some food,” volunteered Bub.

“No, sirree!” refused Abner. “Ye’ve made that trip once to-day in record breaking time. We’ll let grub go till to-morrer.”

But to their great joy this proposed fasting was not necessary. For when they neared the



mountain they were met by the warden, carrying two baskets of provisions.

“Bub, ye’ve met Professor Carlton, the warden. Professor, this youngster is Stanley Malcolm, a city chap, who is trying his best to git killed in the woods.”

The professor warmly shook Stanley by the hand, smiling quizzically at Abner’s brusque introduction. “I feared you would be unable to make my home,” he explained, “and so I’ve taken the liberty to bring down some food.”

“Take all those liberties ye want to so far as I’m consarned, Professor,” earnestly entreated Abner, tearing the coverings from the baskets. “Wal, by the jumping jing!”

“Nothing wrong, I trust,” cried the professor, alarmed at the outcry.

“Nothing wrong,” bellowed Abner, presenting a radiant face. “Why, Red! Why, Bub! Look here!” And he exposed the contents to view. “In all my dreams I never pictered anything better’n a slice of salt pork and a crust of bread. And here, as I live, is *fresh* biscuit, *real* ham, pertaters cooked as I never believed they was cooked outside of heaven, and red stuff in jars—”

“That’s jelly,” laughed the professor, winking at the boys. “My daughter had just fin-



ished a baking and was able to supply the biscuit. She added the jelly for the invalid. There is some coffee and a coffee-pot."

"Prob'ly ye've had yer supper," sounded Abner, eying the provisions wolfishly.

"I have and can not partake with you," said the professor.

"All right; I know ye won't mind if we pitch in right away," said Abner, his tone much relieved as he found the food was to be shared by three rather than four.

"And here's pickles and cheese and a pie," gasped Bub, exploring the other basket.

"And cake and a *whole* roast chicken," added Stanley in amazement. "Why, Professor Carlton, you and your daughter must have thought there were a dozen starving men instead of but three, and surely you must have robbed yourself."

"Not a bit of it," assured the professor. "Now I want to see you eat. One of you start a blaze for the coffee and I'll fetch a pot of water from the spring nearby."

"I'll fetch ye in a deer just as soon as I git my nerves settled," declared Abner, drawing a hamper towards him.

"That will be next fall when the law is off," reminded the professor.



Abner sniffed disdainfully. "I believe in game laws," he said, "but if a deer chases me more'n a couple of miles in the spring, a-trying to bite me, why, I shoot in self-defense. And once the deer is shot there's no reason why the neighbors shouldn't have a bit of venison."

"I'm afraid you woodsmen are often attacked by deer," gravely said the professor.

"Wal, I'll say this. The same deer never chased me twice," returned Abner.

"Do you return home to-night?" asked Stanley, much interested in this new acquaintance, who had the polished manners of a true gentleman and the head of a scholar.

"Yes; it's a stiff, long climb, but my daughter will be waiting," replied the professor. Then reading the youth's thoughts he suggested, "But why can't you all make it, after you've refreshed yourselves? My daughter will prepare you an appetizing breakfast."

"I vum! I'd like to, but I'm too tired," said Abner.

"I believe she intends to have buckwheat cakes and maple syrup," mused the professor.

"What!" cried Abner, half rising. "Of course we'll go. No need of loafing around here. I'd been up there to pay my respects



long ago if it wan't fer these bothersome younkers."

The professor and the youths smiled broadly at the way in which Abner changed his mind under the influence of promised cakes and syrup, but Bub with a practical eye reminded, "Let's not forget to send out an alarm about Big Nick."

"Yes; I'll telephone the minute we get home," promised the professor. "His setting the fire is a serious offense in itself; his attempt at cold-blooded murder must be punished, of course. None of you are safe so long as he is at liberty."

"Do you expect he'll be picked up?" asked Stanley.

The professor shook his head and regretted, "I am sorry to say I do not believe he will be captured unless it is by chance; that is, not by the wardens. We have to keep a close watch for fires. Only a few are blessed as I am with the company of a daughter, or with any company at all. We are stationed far apart and the half-breed can range at pleasure in and among the mountains without being disturbed. Even if he were seen and pursued he could easily escape. I believe he will make for the north, where he will be less apt to meet either



fire or game-warden. And if he does meet one of either the warden might hesitate to attempt his capture unless he caught him at a disadvantage, as to try and fail would mean the warden's death."

"That's so," sorrowfully agreed Abner; "but let me tell ye something. I'm going to git Big Nick before I quit these woods. Now, let's eat."



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THE PROFESSOR AT HOME

At noon next day Stanley opened his eyes to new surroundings. It was several minutes before he could piece together the strenuous events of the preceding two days, or realize just where he was. He knew he was in a soft bed and aching in every muscle. From the open window he could see nothing except a silver speckled sky and a brown top of a mountain on the horizon. The latter was Mt. Jim, although he was to learn that later.

Slowly the closing incidents of his flight through the woods, his encounter with Big Nick and his meeting with Professor Carlton filtered into place in his recollections, but he could not recall the evening trip up the heights to the warden's home.

On dressing and investigating his surroundings he found he was alone in a large log house. The summit wind had free passage through the open door and windows. The living room was commodious and given a cosy atmosphere by the big fireplace at one end. On a table



were a number of books, while many volumes were stacked against one wall. He also detected various evidences of a woman's presence, such as a work box and a sewing table. On the walls of the room the masculine note predominated in several trophies of hunting and fishing trips. Guns, canoe paddles, butterfly nets, lake trout mounted, were intermingled with a few pictures. On the whole the place seemed a paradise after his rough fare in the woods.

But the absence of his host and friends led him to walk painfully to the door. A glorious view was spread out below him. From the top of Hood mountain he could count many lakes dotting the carpet of black growth far below. All inequalities of surface, such as ledges and minor hills, were smoothed out and he could hardly believe that the even, unbroken expanse contained the tangled and blocked path of yesterday. Before he had gazed his fill the sound of voices at the other end of the cabin caught his ear and he hastened to find his friends.

"Sleep well?" smiled Professor Carlton, shaking his hand.

"Never better," replied Stanley. "What time is it?"



"A woodsman would look at the sun," tantalized Bub.

"I forgot," confessed Stanley. Then he became confused in noting a sweet-faced girl eying him with half hidden amusement.

"Laura, this is Stanley Malcolm, a friend and companion of Mr. Whitten and Mr. Thomas," informed the professor.

"I know," she smiled. "I talked with him last night."

"Did I talk with you last night?" gasped Stanley, recalling nothing of the incident.

"She should say she talked at you, but that you were too weary to talk or see anyone," qualified the professor.

"You were all played out when we got here," explained Bub, holding himself very erect as he realized the professor had "mistered" him.

"How do ye feel?" anxiously asked Abner. "Fit to go on to-day?"

"Yes," slowly replied Stanley, but wincing as he moved about.

The professor's quick eye caught his grimace and he firmly declared, "You mustn't move a step from here for a day or so. Better have Mr. Thomas give you a good rub with some liniment I have in the house. I made it myself and it will do you lots of good."



Abner seemed relieved at the prospect of lingering, for the memories of last night's supper were still fresh in his mind. But his tone was a bit testy as he said, "Of course if ye're tuckered out we must accept Professor Carlton's hospitality a bit longer. But we must git up to the end of the trip ahead of Noisy Charlie."

"We could start to-day, Abner, and leave Stanley here to pick up," mischievously suggested Bub. "Then we could call for him later."

"No need of going to that bother," quickly discouraged Abner. "Charlie won't git along for a few days and we might as well take a rest."

Miss Laura shot a sharp glance at the two youths to show she appreciated the old man's desire to enjoy her cooking further, and tempted, "I'll make you something extra nice, Mr. Whitten. Something that the others shall have none of."

"We can stay just as well as not," hastily assured Abner. "And as we're eating ye out of house and home the Great Northern Land and Paper company will settle all the bills."

"There can be no question of settlement," gravely said the professor. "Incidentally I



am employed by that company in addition to my duties as state fire-warden. My orders are to help and aid any who come my way, let alone my inclination to entertain."

Miss Laura nodded happily and explained, "You have no idea how pleasant it is for us to have someone drop in—or, I should say, drop up—no, come up. There! Sometimes we see no one for many weeks. Of course we have the telephone, but it isn't like real visiting."

"But the extra work," reminded Stanley. "It doesn't seem right that a slip of a thing like you should be cooking for three strange men."

She laughed softly. "A strange man and two boys," she corrected. "Besides, Mr. Whitten is no longer a stranger to us, we've heard so much about him."

"Ye git out," bashfully protested Abner, yet reddening with pleasure. "Guess ye never heard no good of me."

"Mr. Whitten is fishing for compliments," she quizzed. "And I'll pay him none." Then seriously, "But I'll say that I know how he saved the lives of three men up north of Parmachena two winters ago in the midst of the worst blizzard of the year. It was simply noble the way he went out and found them, when



everyone had given them up for lost. You know, he took provisions with him and on finding them about to die and ignorant of the woods he built a shelter and remained with them until they were able to follow him to the settlement."

"Quit that stuff," commanded Abner, frowning to conceal his pleasure.

"O he's done that so many times we that know him pay no attention to it now," lightly informed Bub.

"I'll larrup ye, ye young—beg pardon, ma'am, but he's a very troublous boy at times," stammered Abner.

"I'm sure he will grow up and make a good man," gravely encouraged Laura, her eyes dancing.

"I'm sixteen in years and a million feet tall in experience," desperately blurted out Bub.

"My! I didn't know you were so aged," laughed Laura. "Now I must remember my manners. Do you know, I was about to call you Bub."

"I'm very young," quickly broke in Stanley, finding her bright eyes and piquant face very pleasing. "So there's no reason why you shouldn't call me Stanley."

"I think, my daughter, our guests will be de-



ciding you are very, very young," dryly warned her father.

"By jing! Ye just let her ramble on nat'ral like," cried Abner, now thoroughly infatuated with the quick-eyed miss. "Let's have no fin-nified company manners up here. I'm a rough old curmudg'un and these two younkens give me a lot of bother, but we all like to meet nat'ral people. Now, Professor, s'pose ye give me a few p'inters as to how the land lays north of here."

"Gladly. You'll find the map is incorrect in several particulars," assented the professor. "Will you step inside? Laura will entertain our young men."

"The young *men* will entertain me," corrected Laura, once the men had left them. "First, tell me all about your experiences with that awful man, the Indian."

"You tell it, Stanley," diffidently requested Bub.

"There's not much to tell you don't already know," said Stanley. "I can only add that if it wasn't for Bub here I'd never pulled through. I walked for miles leaning on his shoulder. He not only had to pick the way but half carry me."

"That will do," growled Bub. "Miss



Laura, this chap insisted on staying behind and then puts up a fight against Big Nick. He had a stick and Nick had a rifle and was ready to shoot. Not only that, but he tried to desert us and find the enemy and make them believe that he was alone in the woods and was—”

“Stop it!” cried Stanley, his face a deep ruddy color. “Don’t talk nonsense. If Bub hadn’t made the trip to the house, here, and got the ammunition and brought it in double quick to Abner, and then found me just as I was about to drop, why, you’d have an easier time cooking to-day and—”

“Stanley Malcolm, you can talk more fool things in a minute,” exploded Bub. “S’pose she wants to hear that stuff?”

“She certainly does,” cried Laura. “Do you know, I think you both as nice as you can be. It makes me tingle to think of being chased by that man through the dark woods. I should have had a crying spell and fainted, I’m sure.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” grinned Bub. “They don’t grow cowards up here on old Hood.”

“I should say not,” enthusiastically cried Stanley.

“But I didn’t ‘grow’ up here,” modified Laura. “I was born and brought up near



Boston. My father was a professor at Exton college till his health gave out. The doctors said only out-of-doors life would save him and so we came here. My mother died when I was very small. We have lived here for four years. He sent me to Boston the first two winters, but as I grew to realize how lonely he must be up here I refused to leave him."

"Of course you did," admired Stanley.

"But it was very pleasant," she quickly insisted. "I was far happier than I could be in Boston at my aunt's. He tutored me each day, so I knew I was keeping up with my class at the least, and in some studies I have gained over my classmates. One can, you know, when studying alone and putting much time on a subject. But I'm ashamed to talk books with two young men of your experiences."

"You needn't feel ashamed as to me," honestly assured Bub. "I know nothing in books. Had to educate myself, largely, and I haven't astonished anyone by my progress."

"He has, Miss Laura," contradicted Stanley. "He has astonished me. When I reached the mills and he got me work I was mean enough to feel superior to him in book knowledge. You can imagine my confusion—no, you can not; one must make the same mis-



take to imagine it—but I was greatly confused to find he could write far better than I and knew more about mathematics and the like. I will now admit, Bub, it was hard work eating that humble pie you gave me when I learned the truth.”

“That is the way one should talk,” cried Laura, her eyes beaming with appreciation. “If I were a boy—I mean a young man—I should want just such a friend as you are to each other.”

“Can’t a young man have girl friends?” mumbled Bub, casting down his eyes.

“Can’t two young men have a girl friend—the same friend?” added Stanley, following Bub’s diffident example.

Laura laughed delightedly and gave each a frank little hand. “Now, we are three friends,” she announced. “That means we must be very honest with each other. If you do not like my biscuits you mustn’t say you do. You must be sincere about everything in talking with a friend.”

“But I shall like your biscuits,” insisted Stanley.

“The idea of finding fault with the only girl friend I’ve got,” scoffed Bub.

“You two are hopelessly insincere, I can



see," she sighed. "But to prove I trust you I'm going to let you into a secret. Come with me."

Wondering, the two followed her quick steps. Descending a few rods to an overhanging ledge she produced from a natural hiding-place some purple tinted crystals.

"But what are they?" asked Stanley, much puzzled, and finding nothing of moment in her disclosure.

For an answer she held up a finger on which was a beautiful amethyst.

"What! amethysts!" he cried, while Bub's eyes opened wide.

She nodded her head rapidly. "Father sent one away to the city and had it cut and set in this ring. I know where there's a mine of them. I found them myself. People in town, the ones we sent the stone to, have been very curious to know where we got it. Of course we told them nothing. I keep these out here for fear someone will drop in on us some day for the purpose of doing a bit of spying. If they saw any uncut gems in the house they would know we got them around here. Sometime I'll show you the mine."

"I never knew such things could be found in Maine," said Stanley.



“Why, this state is the richest in the Union in gems,” cried Laura. “I do not believe that such a variety can be found anywhere as here, aside from the precious stones. There are men here who make much money mining amethysts, tourmalines and the like. Did you know many fresh water pearls are found in our brooks and rivers?”

Seeing Stanley’s blank expression she continued, “I’ve found a dozen in the last two summers. Some of them father says are worth fully a hundred or more dollars apiece.”

“I should know those things about my own state,” apologized Bub, “but I’ve been so busy in the woods I’ve only had time to hear about them.”

“I’m going prospecting for gems this summer if I can arrange for it,” declared Stanley, his eyes flashing at the thought of adventure.

“I should be sorry if what I’ve told you would lead you to abandon steady and profitable employment,” said Laura, putting back her treasures.

“You need not feel sorry,” declared Stanley. “I shall not go in for it unless Bub can go with me. If he finds it’s dull in the woods and can get away we’ll take a short vacation and hunt gems. I suppose you’ll be next tell-



ing me that gold is also found in Maine." And he smiled at the conceit of his fancy.

Her eyes became very serious. "Why, didn't you know that?" she cried. "Gold has been washed out along Swift river up above and around Byron for years. Men have made good day wages up there right along, with an occasional nugget as a bonus. They say they can find color almost anywhere up through that section."

"Well, I never!" gasped Stanley.

"Gold and pearls and amethysts and tourmalines and—" began Stanley, excitedly.

"And lots of other things that you can learn about later," laughingly obtruded Laura. "Simply remember this: Maine is one vast storehouse of valuable, marketable gems. While gold is only found in small quantities it has paid day wages. But a fortune can be made out of the gems and is being made to-day. At Mt. Mica, in Oxford county, the mining of tourmalines has been carried on as a regular business for years. There are other mines just as rich, if you can find them."

"And I trust you have found such a one," said Bub earnestly.

"I honestly am inclined to believe I have," she whispered.



"I hope so," cried Stanley. "It's a wonder to me that money doesn't grow on trees up here."

"But it does," gravely informed Laura.

He looked at her smilingly, then became dubious in his gaze as her eyes remained calm and serene with no trace of mischief in them.

"Of course you are joking," he faltered.

"No," she quietly replied, shaking her head.

"Miss Laura, I must believe it then," he continued. "If you say dollars grow on trees I know they grow there."

"You see those spruce down below—I mean that bright patch of green?" And she pointed towards the base of the mountain.

"I do," he replied. "And does money grow in that particular orchard?"

"You are beginning to be skeptical," she accused. "I'll tell you no more."

"I am not; I believe," he cried, his tone desperate. "And Bub also believes."

"I'd believe doughnuts grew on them if Miss Laura said so," readily assured Bub.

"Then you are both nice," she decided, "and I'll tell you. I got a hundred odd dollars from those spruce last winter."

"Spruce gum!" exclaimed Bub, clapping his hands.



"Yes, but you shouldn't have told him just yet," she said.

"But spruce gum isn't money," protested Stanley.

"But a pound of it is worth one dollar and sixty cents any time, and perhaps more. That's for the best gum. The seam gum brings about half as much," she explained. "I earned from five to ten dollars a day. It had never been gummed and I only had to break or cut it off in lovely, clear pieces, large pieces, too. Mr. Reed, over at Byron, will take all you can deliver. He's sold more gum than any man in the world—meaning spruce gum, of course. In fact, he is affectionately called 'Gum' Reed."

"And have you now exhausted this wonderful storehouse of yours?" asked Stanley, his eyes gleaming with a new light as he wondered at his new knowledge and felt a keen desire to increase it.

"O no," she replied and shrugged her shoulders. "I am only an ignorant city girl. I know but little of the woods. There are many other lovely and valuable things to be found in the rocks and woods that are fascinating to think of."

"I say, Bub, think of having a spruce gum



mine and making lots of money in the winter," cried Stanley.

"But I'm tired of the woods; think of finding great big amethysts," returned Bub.

"And it's time for me to think of poor Mr. Whitten and father waiting to find dinner on the table while I am gossiping with you two," added Laura, quickening her steps to return to the house.

"She's a stunner!" admired Bub, after she had left them.

"I never knew a girl could be so sensible," declared Stanley. "But what ninnies she makes of us with our ignorance."

"That's just it," wailed Bub. "Here I've lived in the woods all my life and am as ignorant of lots of things as a clam. Of course I've known about gum and have sold some. But I've wasted lots of hours in my trips when I might be examining a ledge for minerals, or opening fresh-water clams for pearls. Take a girl when she's smart and there's no getting ahead of her."

After dinner and while Abner was smoking his pipe in the sun and giving some instructions to Bub, Stanley sought out Laura and with a bit of confusion asked, "Does your father intend to leave here soon?"



Her lips quivered for a moment, and then she explained, "Father has about recovered his health now and would like to obtain a situation in Colorado, where he has many friends. The climate there would agree with him. But he has been out of the harness for four years and finds it hard work to get a place right away."

"But why don't you go out there and live till he gets an opening?" asked Stanley.

Laura flushed, but frankly explained, "We are poor. College professors do not get exorbitant salaries in this country. When my father was taken ill he was forced to find employment even while trying to regain his health. Fortunately he procured this work, which pays a living while making him a well man. But we have no means with which to board anywhere unless he has employment."

"I beg your pardon for asking what I did," humbly apologized Stanley. "I meant all right, and it's a shame that a man as good and wise as your father should be dependent on a salary for a living."

"He's the wisest man in the world," she murmured, clasping her hands in front of her. "The very wisest. He ought to be at the head of a college—a big college."



"I wish I could help him," muttered Stanley.

Instantly her mood changed and she laughed quietly. "At least, it's no harm for me to wish it," he remonstrated, his feelings hurt.

"You'll forgive me, I know," she soothed, her tone quieting him at once. "I thank you for your kind wish. I know you would help him if you could." Then gayly, "And who knows but what sometime you can help him?"

"Who knows?" he repeated, as if talking to himself.

She eyed him stealthily and at last frankly declared, "You are a queer boy."

"I know it—that is, I've been told so," he replied, his thoughts still wandering.

"You came from the city?" she prompted.

"Yes," he replied. "Perhaps foolishly so. I can see now I made some mistakes. I never would have believed it till I came up here and had a chance to look back."

"If your coming has taught you your errors it has been a good thing for you that you came," she encouraged.

"I am inclined to think it is; only, I do not see how I can profit by it and go back and correct my mistakes." And he sighed, as he turned to rejoin the others.



"You have been to school," she said.

"I have been to what are called the best," he replied, "I am ashamed to add that I have not always profited by my opportunities. However, with a new start I shall only have myself to blame if I fail again."

"Success is made up of repeated failures," she reminded.

"You are talking of honest failures," he said. "But when a fellow deliberately makes a fool of himself, is headstrong enough not to admit it, blames everything on to someone else—why, he's the worst sort of a failure."

"But if he sees his mistakes and admits it, why isn't he back already to start over again?" she eagerly persisted, now deeply interested in the youth.

"There are some things you can't fix right," he sorrowfully replied. "Sometime, when you feel better acquainted with me I'd like to tell you the whole wretched business. But I haven't the heart to bother you now—nor would it be right for me to do so."

"It would be right for you to talk with my father," she gently suggested. "He is very wise. I am very simple. I could sympathize with you, but he could help you with advice. When you are ready, talk with him."



“I think I’ll talk with both of you,” he compromised, his old smile returning. “I hear Bub calling and won’t bother you any longer.”

“It’s a luxury to be bothered up here,” she called after him.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### INTO A STRANGE COUNTRY

ON the second morning Abner announced he must go his way, but was prevailed upon to wait till after dinner. Stanley's sprained ankle, thanks to a poultice of beech leaves, was fit for walking and there was no excuse for tarrying longer, except as the pleasure of the Carltons' society might be considered such.

"We shall surely call here after we've finished our business on Flat-Top ridge," earnestly assured Abner, his eyes roving towards the kitchen, whence emanated savory odors. "In the meantime, I guess I'd better have a talk with ye about my business."

Withdrawing to a corner Abner produced his map and pointed out the east line of the disputed tract, and said, "Nace seems to have us up a tree. He holds that is our line, while we're fighting to establish it over here to the west."

"I know," quietly said the professor. "I've been over all that ground. There are about



eighty acres of the best growth in the State in that triangle."

"How'd ye happen to go there?" asked Abner, much surprised.

"Mr. Hatton directed me to. Don't you remember I said I was employed by your company? When I am making my regular trips I do a little cruising for Hatton. Not as you do it, but to see if everything is going all right."

"Ain't that just like Hatton," grumbled Abner. "He never said a word to me about ye're being up there. He gives me my orders as if I was the first one to tackle it, and here I be undertaking a forlorn hope. Of course ye could locate none of the old boundaries?"

"Not a sign," firmly replied the professor. "Honestly, Mr. Whitten, I fear your errand is a hopeless one. I examined the east line very carefully and the cedar posts and other markings are there, showing every sign of age. But along the line claimed by the company I could find nothing to sustain Mr. Hatton's contention."

"That may be," said Abner doggedly; "but any time I find Nace mixed up in a game I know it's crooked. Why, he'd rather make fifty cents in a swindle than to make a dollar honestly."



“You evidently have a very poor opinion of him,” laughed the professor. “Despite his reputation I do not see how the company can go into a court of law and succeed in their suit to hold the land.”

“They’ve got to succeed,” cried Abner, smiting his knee. “It’s not only a question of more’n a hundred thousand dollars, but it’s a question of reputation. Never yet has the company lost in a law-suit. President Thaxter has always directed that the company shall not begin any trouble it can’t go through with and win out. Because of that fighting spirit—and always fighting to win—operators have been mighty skeery of stepping on us. Every man-jack of ’em knows he’s got to have the right on his side if he would whip the company.”

“Certainly; I appreciate that,” said the professor. “But if no litigation has been commenced how is the company embarrassed?”

“Ye mean law-suit by that litisomething,” mumbled Abner. “Taking it fer granted that ye do I’ll tell ye this much: Hatton has gone off half-cocked. He’s formally notified Nace that he should hold the land. Having gone that far and Nace having told other operators and made bets that he would beat us out ye can



see the company will stand in a bad light 'less we win. I vum! I wish I'd know'd ahead that ye'd been over the ground. I guess I'd refused to undertake the job."

"It's too late for you to withdraw now," reminded the professor. "But it is my duty as an honest man to repeat that I do not believe you can prove anything in favor of the company by going up there. Still you must go, of course."

"If we can prove Nace cut over that public lot that might be used as a club against him," suggested Abner, scowling at his thick boots.

"Hardly," denied the professor. "I've studied human nature enough to know that Nace will never let a hundred thousand dollars slip through his fingers for the sake of evading unwholesome publicity. If he has to he'll pay the value of the stumpage—I believe you said it would run in excess of ten thousand dollars—and then he will clean up his tenth of a million. So far as injuring his reputation is concerned he won't care a penny, for he knows he has none to be injured. He simply will bribe some paper to explain how it was a natural mistake for him to get over the line; then he'll give a new bell to some schoolhouse, put a pub-



lic fountain into his home city, and he'll have the next election go his way as he always has in the past."

"Wal, wal, I'm afraid ye're right," admitted Abner. "He was shrewd enough to measure all his chances before going into this. He'll laugh at us. And once he wins in this he'll be after the company with a sharp stick. Of course Hatton is in a sweat, because it may mean his job. President Thaxter won't stand for any bungling. Do ye think I'll be troubled if I go up there?"

"No; not so far as Nace is concerned if he is sure you'll find nothing. And yes, if he's left the matter to the discretion of some of his understrappers and Big Nick has any say. Of course if Nick should swear he was hired to set the fire by Nace or one of his agents it would look black for Nace, if the half-breed is shrewd enough to know that he may use it as a lever in compelling Nace's gang to aid him in getting his revenge. Just how far those men would go I do not know. But I'd feel better if men instead of those two boys were going with you."

"There's no limit to the lengths them varmints will go," said Abner soberly. "Hasn't Nick repeatedly tried to murder us? I guess



they have it writ up in the books that we three sha'n't return to the mills. So far as I know they may have bagged Noisy Charlie on his way back."

The professor shook his head firmly. "I don't fear that," he said. "I've known Charlie ever since I've been here. You can't catch him napping; especially when he realizes what he is confronting."

"And ye say ye saw nothing, or heard nothing when ye was up there?" asked Abner, seemingly fascinated by the possible dangers of the trip.

The professor paused and pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Well, I'll say this: I know I was watched and followed. I believe it was by some agent of Nace's. But I was not molested in any way. What might have happened if I had discovered anything I cannot say. I saw no one, but I came upon signs that told me enough. If I had been an experienced woodsman I could have read much more from those signs, I have no doubt."

Abner shook his head dolefully. Then he declared, "I'll fix up some yarn about gitting a message back to the mills and send the boys with it. Then I'll go on alone, and if anyone is hurt it'll only be old Abner Whitten. And



I'll pass out a-hoping that someone will be brought to book for the murder."

"It won't be discovered as a murder," sighed the professor. "Word will come that you were caught by a tree, or some such report. If I were you I'd wait till Noisy Charlie comes along and then make the trip without the boys."

"No," said Abner firmly, "I won't have it appear I'm afraid to go up there alone. I start after dinner, but the youngers must return to the mills."

"Which the youngers most positively will not do, Mr. Whitten, humbly begging your pardon for overhearing your remarks," broke in Stanley's resolute voice.

"Which remarks ought to make you feel ashamed to look us in the face, Mister Whitten," angrily added Bub's voice.

"See here! Who's boss 'round here? Me or two young varmint that come a snooping 'round and listening to their elders' private talk?" fumed Abner.

"It will do no good to find fault with us," gently replied Stanley.

"It won't, eh?" blustered Abner. "Wal, we'll see. When folks come a-spying 'round—"



"We were not spying and you know it, Mister Whitten," broke in Bub.

"It was entirely an accident," insisted Stanley. "Professor Carlton believes that."

"Of course, boys," soothed the professor. "Both Abner and I know you are not capable of any meanness."

"They may be angels—which fact I'm a-doubting—but they don't go with me," loudly announced Abner.

"Then we'll follow you," grinned Bub.

"Every camp you make you'll find us near neighbors," promised Stanley.

"See here, boys," placated Abner; "let's stop arguing. It's absolutely necessary that I git word back to Hatton—"

"O ho!" roared Bub. "He's forgotten so quick that we overheard about his 'fixing up some yarn.'"

"Thought mebbe ye didn't hear all I said. But ye don't go with me."

"All right. We can make the trip alone then," said Stanley.

Laura in the background had overheard this conversation and now with eyes kindling approached and placed a hand on Abner's shoulder. "Mr. Whitten, I was with Stanley and Bub when they came around the corner and



caught your words. I do not want any of you to make this trip now. Wait till your guide returns and overtakes you. Surely, there can be no need of hurry."

"That's where you're wrong, Miss Laura," said Abner. "It's got to be done in a rush."

"If that is the case," she slowly said, "the boys must go with you. It would be a crime to let you make the trip alone."

"Hurrah! ain't she a brick?" cried Bub, swinging his hat.

"The court seems to be against you, Mr. Whitten," laughed Stanley. "When do we start?"

"Right after dinner," growled Abner, filling his pipe viciously. "And if any fool younkers meet with trouble, Abner H. Whitten ain't to be blamed."

After the three young folks had retreated triumphantly, Abner remarked, "Two of the best younkers a man ever had with him. That feller, Reddy, would kill out any case of blues just by gitting ye into trouble. It's been like a three-ring circus ever since we left Kennebago stream."

"I like them immensely," heartily assured the professor. "But now as to the trip. Take one of my canoes and follow Briar stream.



You'll have to carry Snake falls and will find lots of swift water to be poled above that point. But you ought to make the trip in three days, even if you take it easy. You'll find my blaze at the southeast end of the ridge and can follow it right through due north as the company claims the line was originally run. That'll save you some time. You can take my line as correct, as I was very careful."

The youths and Laura in the meanwhile were busy in planning on a reunion, as Stanley insisted on styling their next meeting. Bub tried to aid with the dinner but was expelled from the kitchen after spilling the flour.

The noon-day meal was eaten largely in silence, as each one realized the dangers attending the trip. Abner, however, was not deterred by any gloomy cast of thoughts from eating most heartily. When it came time to pack the knapsacks—kindly furnished by the professor to replace those lost—Laura quietly insisted on contributing various delicacies as well as a quantity of substantial viands.

"It's the first time in my life I ever took home-cooking into the woods," said Abner. "Guess Noisy Charlie would give me the laff if he knew it. He'd say I was gitting to be a reg'lar dude."



“Then we’ll leave Miss Laura’s cooking behind,” suggested Bub, winking elaborately.

“Wal, ye won’t,” cried Abner, beginning to get excited. “What do I care fer Charlie, or any other man’s opinion. I’ll take what I want to.” And he hurried to complete the packing as if fearing Laura might change her mind.

Professor Carlton and Laura accompanied the three half way down the mountain, when the youths insisted that Laura should return home. The professor completed the journey to the canoe, and after giving Abner additional explicit directions earnestly shook each by the hand and bade them God-speed.

That afternoon the cruisers took things easy, one of them always keeping a sharp outlook for Big Nick. But twilight found them peacefully arrived at a good camping-place with nothing having happened to disturb the placid quiet of their progress. Thus far they had used the paddles and Stanley began to pride himself upon his ability in this line. His exultation was short-lived, however, when Abner found he had constructed the lean-to in a stand of tall spruce.

“Want to kill us all afore Big Nick can git a whack at us?” rebuked Abner. “What d’ye



s'pose Bub and me always picked a open place fer, if it wasn't the best place?"

"I supposed you just happened to," replied Stanley, meekly.

"See that limb, there?" and he pointed to a large bough that had been wrenched off by lightning or a tempest. Stanley nodded. "Wal, if yer lean-to had been standing beneath it we'd all be dead by this time," continued Abner. "Pitch yer shelter out there in the open where nothing can fall on us if it comes up a blow."

Properly humbled Stanley patiently undid his work and completed the slanting roof as directed. Bub grinned sympathetically and asked him if he were building a whole village.

Trout supplemented their domestic rations, and each said he had never enjoyed a meal more. Then Abner lighted his pipe for a brief smoke before turning in. An olive backed thrush, far up the slope, was singing an evening song. The echo faintly responded from some nearby mountain, while Stanley's favorite, the hermit thrush, filled the woods about them with vocal purity.

On the next day the falls were encountered. Two tiresome trips were necessary to carry the canoe and supplies around this obstacle,



and once the water road was resumed the paddles were laid aside for poles. Abner and Bub handled the poles, although Stanley begged to be allowed to help.

"We can't run the risk of being dumped," growled Abner. "We've got everything lashed tight, so's if we should git dumped there's nothing that can git away. But we ain't taking no chances with a green man."

"But I've learned to paddle," protested Stanley, who did not enjoy remaining idle as if he could not be trusted.

"A child can learn to paddle," sneered Bub. "But only men are allowed to handle a pole, my son."

"I don't see as there is anything very difficult about it," answered Stanley. "You simply put the pole in and push. Think I'm going to loaf through all this swift water?"

"You surely will, my son, unless you get out and wade," teased Bub. "Now, be silent, please; children should be seen and not heard."

And to exhibit his skill to the envious Stanley he carelessly pushed on his pole and in a second it was caught between two rocks and the canoe capsized.

"What—what in sin be ye doing?" angrily cried Abner, as he rose spluttering to the sur-



face and braced against the current to hold the canoe.

Between coughing and laughing Stanley could only point to the streaming, downcast face of Bub. Finally he managed to inform, "It is not my fault. Mr. Thomas, the expert. is the one to blame."

"Don't see how my pole caught," sheepishly bellowed Bub above the roar of the current.

With considerable effort and with each of the trio going under water more than once the delicate craft was worked ashore and righted. Nothing had been lost, but the flour was a dark brown paste.

"Give Reddy that pole and sit down and see if ye can keep quiet," thundered Abner, as the journey was recommenced.

Bub silently obeyed and grinned ruefully as Stanley took his place and deftly performed his portion of the labor.

"It's all in knowing how, Mr. Thomas," he informed the disconsolate Bub. As no more accidents marred the day good progress was made before camp was pitched.

As Stanley was preparing the lean-to, this time in an opening, he was struck with the uselessness of going through the daily grind of



cutting poles and gathering spruce or pine boughs.

“Why isn’t it more sensible to take a tent along?” he impatiently inquired, irritated by some remarks from Bub.

“Don’t want a tent,” grumbled Abner, still lamenting the loss of the flour. “If it had been in that canoe when we was spilled it would be soaked and heavy as lead. A tent ain’t the easiest thing in the world to pack ’round through the woods. If ye knew ye was going to be located in one spot for several weeks ye might consider it, but who wants to tote a heavy canvas when a few minutes’ work by a smart younker like yerself will build something to take the place of it?”

“Other folks must take tents with them,” replied Stanley.

“I guess not up in this region,” said Abner.

“Yes, up in this region,” persisted Stanley, his eyes gleaming in triumph as he believed he was about to get the best of the veteran.

“And why?” dryly asked Abner.

“Because if anyone built a lean-to they’d leave it standing. And here are the remains of a campfire and there’s no lean-to. That shows whoever built the fire had a tent.”



"A campfire!" cried Abner, quickly leaving his task of preparing the coffee. "Where?"

Stanley indicated the charred embers he had discovered, and with a smothered exclamation Abner kneeled and examined them closely.

"They're ahead of us," he quietly announced as he rose to his feet.

"They? who?" asked Stanley, his voice a bit nervous.

"Members of the Nace outfit," shortly replied Abner, his face drawing down.

"But how do you know?" persisted Stanley, gazing apprehensively over his shoulder at the still, dusky depths of the forest.

"It's a fresh fire," explained Abner, the worried look deepening on his wrinkled features.

Bub came forward and examined the blackened sticks and pieces of charcoal carefully. "It was built before the rain of night before last," he said.

"That's right," frowned Abner. "And it means they are only a day ahead of us."

"But why do you say 'they'?" There may be only one," suggested Stanley.

"They are following the stream. They have a canoe," replied Abner. "If there was but one man we'd overhauled him. There are



three or four. They slept in their blankets without a shelter. That means they are in a rush. I hope ye ain't been cleaning the rifles again, Reddy."

"I see to it that the rifles are loaded all the time," chuckled Bub.

"Well, there's one consolation," declared Stanley, his voice full of confidence. "They did not believe we would come this way, else they would have concealed their fire."

"That's good woodsman craft," cried Abner, his eyes brightening. "They took it for granted we would wait on Hood till Noisy Charlie come along, or they'd never left such a trail. So, we don't have to fear an ambush, unless we go too fast and overtake 'em. We'll be sort of quiet and Injun like to-morrer and keep a careful eye out fer all small clearings on the bank."

That night Stanley did not rest as well as usual. Throughout his dreams the blood-streaked face of Big Nick played an important part and once Bub aroused him with a kick and asked him what he was groaning about.

"I thought the half-breed had me," shivered Stanley, pressing close to his friend.

"Don't cry till you're hurt," sleepily advised Bub. "We're loaded now and we don't run



from a regiment of Big Nicks. Besides, he knows we are loaded and he won't be as bold again."

The third day was taken more leisurely. With Stanley able to handle a pole the previous day's record could have been surpassed with ease; but Abner was content to advance slowly, ever keeping a close watch of the banks ahead.

"What I fear to see is a thread of smoke," he explained to his young companions. "If they should let up their pace we'd come in sight of their campfire. That would mean we'd have to hide the canoe and make a circle around 'em, which would be hard work and would cost us time. If we can reach the foot of Flat-top Ridge without running into 'em I'll be tickled to death. For that's where we begin work."

"Flat-top, eh?" pondered Bub. "That's a new country to me."

"As it is to me. I had orders to say nothing till we was about there. As we should see it when we turn the next bend I feel at liberty to speak."

In a short time the bend was reached and three pair of eyes were anxiously focused ahead.



“There she is,” muttered Abner, pointing to a long sugar-loaf shaped ridge. “This stream comes along its base. The disputed line is on the east end. If we can make pretty near the end we’ll take to the woods.”

For the rest of the afternoon dead water was encountered, which not only lessened the drudgery but also allowed more time to examine the banks. Whenever possible Abner hugged the east shore, believing those ahead would camp on that side as it would take them to the base of the ridge.

Several times Stanley gave a false alarm, mistaking some wood sound for a human voice. Especially deceiving to him was the conversational tone of the coon as twilight gathered. Although fooled by it the night he left the lean-to to evidence his courage, he could not rid himself of the belief but what he heard two men talking in low tones each time one of the animals sounded his note.

“We’ll camp here,” abruptly informed Abner, turning the canoe ashore. “And don’t build a fire,” he added as they quietly disembarked and threw their supplies on the shore. “That is, not till we find out if our friends are in this neighborhood.”

For some distance up stream and in back



Abner went on a solitary scouting expedition, but returned with no news.

"I'll go up that rise and climb a tree," offered Bub. "If there is a fire anywhere along the stream I'll most likely see it."

Abner nodded his consent and Bub dashed away. Stanley would have gone with him, but not being invited believed his friend would prefer to go alone.

In a short space of time Bub came running noiselessly back.

"Well?" asked Abner, not lifting his head from the task of unpacking the food.

"I saw their campfire fully half a mile upstream," panted Bub.

"I expected as much," calmly announced Abner. "And it relieves my mind. They don't suspect we're in this neighborhood, or they'd mask it. Git some dry stick and start a small blaze back of them hemlocks. Ye needn't be afraid of a little smoke, as it's gitting dark, but don't make more'n necessary, as that Big Nick can see like a hungry hawk. After we've had our supper we'll hide the canoe and sneak in back towards the end of the ridge. It may be we can do our work and git out without their knowing it."



“Only it will mean we must eat cold victuals,” sighed Bub.

“We’ll be lucky if we’re allowed to eat anything. By jing! I’d give a cookie if Noisy Charlie was only here.”



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### A VAIN SEARCH

SKIRTING the ridge from the river bank to the southeast point where Professor Carlton had commenced his survey and where Abner knew he would find the warden's blaze the three cruisers took advantage of the remaining twilight to proceed towards their destination and put as much distance between them and the hostile camp-fire up-stream as possible.

Needless to say the small campfire built behind the hemlocks was carefully obliterated, Bub taking pains to scatter dried leaves and sticks over the dead embers. The canoe, too, was cunningly concealed a few yards from the bank. With all traces of their arrival thus eliminated the trio believed their presence would be unsuspected till some accident revealed it.

"And we must be mighty careful not to have any accidents happen," cautioned Abner, who was leading the way.

"If them fellers believe we are at Hood mountain they will keep to the river, waiting



for us to arrive. They won't think of cruising around the ridge 'less they see a smoke, or hear a rifle shot. So, it's short rations and a quick trip. Gitting back is what troubles me."

"Why?" asked Bub.

"I expected Reddy to put that question," replied Abner. "I'm afraid that by the time we've done our work the Nace gang will have learned we ain't at Hood, and being suspicious that we're up here they'll begin snooping 'round a bit."

"I feel a sprinkle," broke in Stanley, who had been holding out his palm to test the weather.

"By jing! that's so. It's going to rain," mumbled Abner. "We'll have to find an opening and put up a lean-to. Only, ye'll have to use yer knives in cutting the poles as we can't risk any noise. "I'd planned on sleeping in our blankets to-night."

"And what if they find the lean-to?" inquired Stanley, who preferred a drenching to the chance of meeting Big Nick and his friends.

"We'll take the chance," returned Abner. "It ain't likely they'll do any scouting while it rains and there won't be any signs to draw 'em over here anyway. I'm too old to sleep in wet blankets 'less I have to. If my rheumatiz



gits to capering 'round in my system ye'll find ye have a cripple to tote back to civilization."

"Never knew you had rheumatism," said Bub, as they halted in a small opening surrounded by dense growth.

"Never had," readily conceded Abner. "But I might have. And I'm too old to git use to it."

The gathering darkness and the fact the hatchets were prohibited made the task of erecting the lean-to an arduous one. Besides the rain was pattering down quite steadily before the last spruce bough was placed on the roof and the three crawled into moist blankets in any but an agreeable frame of mind.

The continual drip-drip of the rain brought a feeling of homesickness to Stanley, which he sought in vain to fight off. His thoughts wandered persistently to the snug home up on Hood mountain and he recalled over and over the kind words and advice of Laura. His companions could not know what was on his mind, nor that long after their regular breathing told they were asleep that he remained awake and miserable.

The morning broke grey and sullen. The rain had ceased but threatened to fall at any minute. Stanley gazed hopefully towards the



east, trusting to find a faint glow that would betoken the coming of the sun.

“Ye needn’t spend time staring for clear weather,” snapped Abner, whose temper was a bit out of joint as he prepared a meager breakfast. “Ye ought to know by this time that when the clouds hang as low and heavy as they do now that it’ll keep it up all day.”

“He hasn’t been out in a rain storm before,” reminded Bub. “The only rain we’ve had was the night we slept warm and tight up on Hood.

“Will ye keep shut?” groaned Abner. “What ye want to bring up them memories fer? I’m trying to keep my mind off’n it. I vum! but I’d like to be sticking my legs under that table now. Real coffee with condensed milk and some of Miss Laura’s cakes and maple syrup.”

“She makes the best buttered toast I ever ate,” sighed Stanley.

“Let her and her toast alone,” harshly commanded Abner. “Want to drive me crazy? The idee of talking about toast when we’ve got to set down to soggy bread and cold victuals and no coffee. Prob’ly she’ll be having some of them hot rolls this morning. Never see a timber cruiser yet but what was a fool, else he wouldn’t be prying ’round in the



woods when he could have a hot breakfast in a civilized way."

The old man's inconsistency evoked a faint smile from the two youths, but the day was too dreary for a thorough appreciation.

After the hurried meal Abner strapped on his pack and led the way through a fine drizzle. At first it was nothing more than a mist which caused their clothing to steam. Gradually the water began to trickle from their hat brims into their eyes and down their necks until Bub said he wished he could fall into a pool and get well soaked and have done with it.

With the exception of the wayfarers the whole wood seemed to be indoors. No bird calls gladdened their path; no unseen forms crashed away in alarm as they advanced. Only the monotonous drip-drip accompanied them. Under the spruce and pine they found something of shelter, but when the hardwood growth was penetrated Abner's hand in pushing aside limb or bush sent a shower-bath over the two behind, and by the time they reached the foot of the ridge they were thoroughly drenched.

"Can't we build a little fire and dry out?" asked Stanley.

"If ye could build a fire on all sides and over-



head and carry it 'round with ye all day it might be a good scheme," sarcastically replied Abner. "But fer me, I'd prefer not to go through the process of gitting wet ag'in. What good would it do ye if ye was bone dry this minute? In five more ye'd be wet a'gin. No, we'll rough it. This is what city chaps pay money to enjoy in the woods."

"Only they usually bring lots of tents and a stove and read novels inside while it rains," added Bub.

"I can stand it," laughed Stanley, now beginning to be amused at the water trickling down into Abner's disgusted eyes.

"Shall we wait till to-morrow before beginning the cruise?" asked Bub, whose hopes were centered on an affirmative answer.

"No, sirree!" exploded Abner. "We'll start in now. If this rain thinks it can make me quit it's mistaken."

"But we don't ever work when it rains," remonstrated Bub.

"That's true when we are on a decent cruise, as the time we spend drying our clothes at night more'n takes off anything we gain. But this is a rush order and we've got to go through with it."

"If the rain inconveniences us it will keep



Big Nick and his gang under cover," Stanley sought to encourage.

"I'd almost prefer to dodge a hot bullet to catching wet rain drops all day," grumbled Abner, viciously pushing his way through some undergrowth. "Come on; we'll make a start."

With a doleful grin Bub winked at Stanley and fell in behind. For two hours the three climbed and fought their way up the side of the ridge. Then Abner came to a halt and began hunting for the warden's blaze.

"He said I'd be sure to find it and could depend upon it," growled Abner after several minutes of vain effort. "He didn't know what he was talking about. I'll bet there ain't a mark within a mile of here. Most likely he started in at the other end of—"

"Possibly this is it," broke in Stanley, pulling aside some rain laden boughs and revealing a chipped trunk.

"Wal, he must have took pains to hide it," crustily acknowledged Abner.

But with the finding of the blaze Abner's temper improved a trifle. In his zeal to run out the old line he forgot the rain in a measure and his eyes regained some of their old light as he eagerly worked his way due north.



By the aid of his compass and map and with the youths some fifteen feet on either side of him he pursued his quest for a mile. The net result of his endeavors was zero.

To be doubly sure he carefully retraced his steps and arrived at the starting point without having discovered anything in the company's favor.

"It's simply a waste of time and muscle," he complained as they came to a pause. "If Carlton couldn't find anything it ain't expected that I can. Every monument has been removed."

"Does this end it?" asked Stanley, deeply disappointed at their failure.

"Hardly," grimly replied Abner. "We'll run the line Nace is depending on. Our line originally, as we hold, ran from here due north. Nace holds it runs from here northeast. And that leaves him the triangle of rattling good timber. Wal, let's be moving."

The second trip was made more quickly, as at every one-fourth of a mile the cruisers found the cedar post, encircled with stones and again encircled by blazed trees.

"Now we'll cut to the west for a fourth of a mile and then we've made the round of the lot," said Abner.



This leg of their trip was accomplished in a pouring rain, the very heavens seeming to open in a purpose to drown them. Although protected by a noble growth, the roof of tree tops leaked in many places and Stanley never before realized how much water his clothing could hold. The water squashed in his boots at every step and his sleeves were spouts, ever sending two trickling streams down his arms and wrists. His hat was a sodden rag.

“Now we are where we were when we turned back after tracing the west line,” informed Abner, coming to a halt. “This makes twice we’ve gone over this line going backward, or three times in all. I guess I’ll let ye two follow it out, as there ain’t nothing to be found, and I’ll take a dip into the lot and make a few stands. Might as well git an idee of what we’re losing while I’m about it.”

Bub nodded and took the lead, striking a true course to the point where Professor Carlton had made his initial blaze. The youths proceeded slowly, each secretly anxious to find some trace of a monument or boundary mark, in order to crow over Abner. As a result the three arrived at the starting point at about the same time.

The rain began to lessen, but it was not the



promise of a clear to-morrow that caused Abner's eyes to light up with enthusiasm.

"Younkers, it's one of the best bits of spruce I ever see," he cried, smacking his lips. "I made about ten stands and figger it will run ahead of any eighty acres in the state."

"And we can't have it," reminded Stanley, sorrowfully.

The light faded from the veteran's gaze and he bowed his head. "I was so took up with the timber that I plumb forgot it isn't fer us to operate," he groaned. "Why! it's simply a shame to let such a growth git away from the Great Northern. If I wasn't a honest man I'd shift them posts back where Nace prob'ly took 'em from in the first place."

"That would be hardly honest," protested Stanley. "We are not positive that he removed them. We only suspect it."

"Of course we can't do it, although anything would be honest if it beat Nace," snarled Abner. "But it wouldn't do any good to shift 'em, as he's had surveyors up here, who'll swear as to where they found the posts. I must admit that all the marks are there as he claims, even to the marks on the beech beside the half-mile post. I guess we lose."

"Well, what next?" demanded the practical



Bub. "No use crying over spilled milk. If we can't find anything, we can't, and we might as well eat. The company can't blame us for failing to do the impossible."

"I hate to give up," remonstrated Stanley.

"Seeing it's the first time I ever failed I kind of feel the same way," shortly informed Abner. "Start a small blaze, Bub."

"Going to risk a fire?" inquired Bub, his tone showing surprise.

"Yas, I'm going to risk a fire," returned Abner, completely losing his patience. "Is it fer me or one ye youngers to say what I'll risk?"

"Certainly it is for you, Mister Whitten," politely answered Bub.

"Wal, git busy, then. I'm going to have some hot coffee no matter what happens. Only, ye needn't feel called upon to make a bonfire."

But the steaming coffee did not work any radical change in the veteran's temperament. It was not the discomforts of the day that affected him; it was the knowledge that he had failed for the first time in his long career.

"It ain't fair," the youths heard him muttering to himself as he moodily filled his pipe. "It ain't right to send me up to do detective



work. I'm a timber cruiser. Give me a cant and I'll cruise it and tell how much she'll cut and what equipment is needed. But I never advertised myself to be a detective that could find what ain't to be found. Hatton said I needn't come back till I'd won out. His own job was in the balance. I'll beat back to the warden's and send in word I'm looking fer a new place."

Stanley grimaced as he overheard this confession of defeat and gazed appealingly at Bub. But the latter simply shook his head, indicating that he, too, surrendered and believed there was nothing they could do.

"How long do we stay here, Mr. Whitten?" finally asked Stanley.

Abner raised his head and stared vacantly; then as he sensed the query he shortly replied, "I'm waiting fer Noisy Charlie to arrive. If he don't come by to-morrer I'll start back. He knows where to look fer us and should turn up by to-morrer morning."

"Isn't there anything he could do to help us?" anxiously asked Stanley.

Abner knocked out the heel of his pipe in deep irritation. "S'pose a Injun guide can cruise better'n I can?" he demanded. "Charlie has his fine points, but when it comes to



locating lines and monuments I can teach him his A B C's."

"That's so," whispered Bub. "If Abner can't win out, no one can. When Hatton sent him up here he knew he was sending the best man in the state. But he can't do the impossible."

"Did Hatton mean what he said about discharging him if he failed?" murmured Stanley.

Bub grinned, "Guess he'd change his mind if he did," he replied. "Anyway, Abner would be so touchy that he'd refuse to go back unless he succeeded. So far as a job is concerned there isn't an operator in Maine, doing business on a big scale, but who would be glad to get Abner. He's had lots of offers from all over."

"Then he means what he says; that he gives up all hope and admits the fight is lost?" queried Stanley, his eyes flashing.

"That is exactly what he means, my son, and I'd lose lots of sleep over it, if that would help any," returned Bub.

"I feel mad clear through. I'm going to walk it off. Give me the rifle," gritted Stanley, rising.

"I wouldn't take a gun, Stanley," advised



Bub. "Take an ax. You won't meet anything that needs a gun, and it would only mean you'd have to clean it up after you got back. Leave the gun in its case and take an ax, my son."

"All right," agreed Stanley. "Don't worry about me. I can find my way back. See, it is about to clear up." And he pointed to a rift in the clouds where a spear of sunshine was stabbing its way through to gladden the earth.

"Don't leave the ridge, and be careful to keep along our blaze," yawned Bub, feeling inclined to take a nap.

Abner lifted his head with a jerk. "Where ye going?" he sharply demanded.

"Only for a little stroll to get some of the mad out of my system?" sadly smiled Stanley, grasping the ax.

"I don't blame ye. Follow the blaze due north and ye can't get lost. And as I don't relish the idee of staying behind with this magpie I'll cruise over towards the enemy's camp and see what they're doing. Stay here, Bub, and keep camp."

"Come back in good temper, Mister Whitten; and be careful that Big Nick doesn't get a crack at you. Take a rifle?"

"No," decided Abner. "I don't figger on



being seen. No use to git the guns wet. Remember, Reddy, don't leave the blaze and don't fail to git back before it's dark."

"I'll be here before you are," promised Stanley. "I shall not go far. The sunshine is beginning to cure me already. So long, Bub."

"Be sure and find all the missing monuments," cautioned Bub.

"As Nace has stolen them and set them up on the other line I fear I can't," laughed Stanley. "But I feel it in my bones that we're going to win out yet."

"What ye feel in yer bones is a touch of rheumatiz," grumbled Abner, striding away towards the river.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### A DISCOVERY AND A CAPTURE

STANLEY felt quite an adventurer as he picked his way from blaze to blaze. When with the others he had simply followed their lead. Now all the responsibility rested on him. Of course the frequent patches left by Abner's hatchet were a sufficient guide even to his untrained eyes. He simply had to keep along this line to pick a correct course, both going and returning. And yet the undertaking was tinged with an air of danger.

In the first place he was alone; secondly, his isolation permitted him to people the woods with hidden foes. He grasped the ax firmly as he advanced and smiled grimly to find himself moving with cautious tread. Once a porcupine leisurely crossed his path and he half-raised the ax, expecting to meet some dangerous enemy.

When about half way down the line he halted irresolute. For some unnamed reason he felt impelled to return.

"Nonsense," he told himself. "Nothing can



be wrong with Bub. I said I would go to the end of the line and I will."

Still the vague feeling of alarm accompanied him as he closed his lips and resolutely resumed his way to the north. It seemed a long mile, but at last he came to the last blaze and willingly turned to retrace his steps.

As he took the backward trail his desire to do something to aid Abner got the better of his nervousness and he found himself closely scanning every foot of the way between the marked trees. He half smiled at his conceit, but persisted in his search. Only he did not know what he was searching for. It would be almost a miracle if Nace—providing he had shifted the boundaries—had left any tell-tale clues behind him. Reason repeatedly told him this much, and yet his optimism kept urging him to search.

"Well, I confess I'm several kinds of an idiot," he frankly assured himself as he leaned against a large tree to rest. Through a rift in the swaying roof he could catch a glimpse of blue sky. The sun as yet had not penetrated his resting place, but it was comforting to know that once back in the open he could speedily dry his soggy clothing.

As he ruminated over the last few days and



Abner's great disappointment he began to go over the situation in detail. Nace had everything to prove his case. Even the big beech with the surveyor's private mark, made nearly a century before, still stood as a witness for the suspected operator. This led him to notice that the tree he was leaning against also was a beech and his eyes opened in admiration as he decided it must be nearly three feet in diameter.

"It's more than two and a half feet," he mused, tapping the trunk idly with the back of his ax. "It's fully as large—yes, larger—than the one on Nace's line. It's about half way."

Then his breath came in a gasp as his ax-head hit a place that gave back a dead sound.

The bark looked smooth, yet it felt beneath the ax as if the wood were dead.

"It can't be! it can't be!" he murmured, sinking down at the foot of the tree.

Then he rose and examined the trunk more carefully. "How Bub would laugh at me if he could see me," he muttered. But the more he tapped the bark the more excited he became and at last he cut a notch above the hollow sounding spot and one below it.

"That will be a strip about eighteen inches long," he whispered, hardly daring to proceed.



“Now I’ll measure outside the dead spot about five inches. That makes it ten inches wide; now to cut it out. But I must work carefully, so I can replace the bark. For if Bub or Abner should find it I’d have to confess and then they’d joke me ever after.”

Composing himself he quickly cut the four sides of the panel of bark and drawing a long breath wrenched it loose. With an inarticulate cry he stood dumbfounded. There on the tree, clearly outlined in every detail, was the linked circles crossed by the arrow, just as they had found it on the other beech. There were the original owners’ initials, also.

“Can it be! Can it possibly be!” he repeated over and over, staring with mouth agape at the ancient record preserved in the tree trunk.

“Am I dreaming, or is it real?” he whispered, pinching himself to make sure he was not asleep. But there was no doubt of his important discovery and his heart expanded and he felt dizzy as he faintly realized this one tree was worth more than a tenth of a million dollars as it stood.

Finally he collected his scattered senses and examined the panel of bark. Here he had new reason for wonderment and exultation. For



the inside of the bark in fitting into the ancient marking had grown ridges that were the reverse of the circles and initials. He knew that if it were held up before a mirror it would read as did the original.

Then the magnitude of it swept over him; he had found by accident what Abner, the veteran could not. It was all clear to him now. Nature, on discovering the wounds inflicted by man, had promptly set to work to heal and conceal. The bark had gradually formed a new protecting surface over the marking, invading all the creases in its effort to undo man's work.

Sometime within the last few years Nace had discovered that if the cedar posts were shifted it might be possible to get possession of a big slice of this timber land. A beech was mentioned in the original description of the true line. He had found no beech bearing any record of the survey and had passed this hidden monument unsuspecting. But he had found a big beech about half way of the line he intended to substitute. The original beech had been destroyed, he undoubtedly believed. But the ancient beech on his fraudulent line would be accepted as the genuine. It only needed the mark of the two circles and arrow and the



initials. This forgery he undoubtedly did himself, not trusting another, Stanley concluded. And in doing it he was cunning enough to give it every appearance of age. Then after a few years had passed and nature had come to his assistance in furthering the deception he had announced his holdings to include the disputed territory.

"I can't make it seem true even yet," complained Stanley to a squirrel chattering at him from a nearby limb. "It's simply ridiculous that I should blunder onto this all-important tree."

This line of thought led him to a graver one. What should he do with his discovery? Should he hasten to camp, triumphantly bearing the strip of bark as his first impulse urged him; or should he proceed more cautiously and prudently?

"Now, let's get this thing right," he pondered, frowning at the bark. "If I leave this here it will be almost too dark to fetch Abner to this spot to-night. I've got to tell him to-night or I'd go crazy. If I take it with me and anything should happen a half of my proof and the best half would be lost. For Nace could claim he committed the forgery on this beech, while everyone would know he couldn't grow



this bark so as to tell a lie. No, the bark is the important thing."

As he was thus weighing the situation he was suddenly seized with alarm. He had heard no sound, he had seen nothing, and yet his heart began beating like a trip-hammer. It was similar to the sensation of fear he had experienced a short while before, when wandering away from the camp.

"I guess, Mr. Bark, we'll hide you here," he whispered, peering stealthily over his shoulder.

As he searched about him for a hollow tree or log in which to place his treasure he laughed aloud gently.

"To think I would be silly enough to hide the bark and leave the tree exposed. Of course the bark must go back in place, also the chips I cut out. Now to find them."

Owing to the care with which he had removed his exhibit he found it an easy task to replace the panel so as to defy all but the most careful scrutiny. Even the chips, where he cut the notches at top and bottom, were arranged in place by the means of several pegs. Then to more effectually cover up all traces of his work he found some reindeer lichen and trailed it across the tree.

Then he stepped back a few feet and tested



it. He could discern nothing that would indicate what was hidden beneath the panel. As he was about to turn away, however, he noticed he had left the twigs and ground at the foot of the beech like an open book to a woodsman. He paused long enough to erase all signs of his having been there. This done he swung his ax over his shoulder and started rapidly for camp.

Bub had asked him to find the ancient and original records. He had found them. And how Bub's eyes would roll and how Abner would splutter when he sank wearily into a sitting posture and by degrees unfolded his great secret. He would play the part of one discouraged and work the situation up to a disagreeable climax before imparting his news. If possible he would lead Abner along into scolding him.

But as he neared the end of his mile cruise he found his joviality leaving him. He was unaccountably depressed. It angered him to confess it. Here he was, bringing the best of news, and yet he felt as if something had gone wrong. He quickened his steps, and then halted irresolutely.

If he arrived and neither of his friends were there to welcome him he would not know what to do. It would be easier to wait out in the



woods than to linger by the deserted campfire. Of course Bub would be there, and yet there was no atmosphere of home-coming for him as he came in sight of the opening.

“O-ee-e-e!” he sounded through his hands, pausing again for he knew not what reason.

There was a space of absolute silence and then faintly came back “O-e-e-e!”

“That’s Bub,” he muttered. “But his reply doesn’t sound very cheerful.” Next he smiled; for why should Bub feel cheerful? If Bub knew what news was being brought to him he would be dancing and prancing to meet his chum.

Again Stanley sounded the call and again it was answered; this time more clearly, but with no particular cordiality in its tone.

“Hi, Bub!” cried Stanley, as he drew within calling distance. “Where are you?”

“Here,” returned a sullen voice from beyond a bunch of ground hemlock.

“Well, cheer up, Mr. Thomas. Can’t you give me a better welcome than that?” There was no reply and Stanley continued, “I say, old man, it’s bad enough for Abner to have the blues, but when you—Heavens!”

The exclamation might well be forgiven him. For bound to a tree, his mouth distended by a



cruel gag and wholly unable to speak, was Bub, tears of rage filling his eyes as he beheld his unsuspecting companion walking into the trap.

With a low cry Stanley turned to escape into the woods, but was tripped up by a villainous looking man, who laughed harshly as he made sure of his second victim.

In a few minutes Stanley found himself tied to a tree near Bub, only he was not gagged. As he looked about he beheld two other men lounging on the ground, but rejoiced to observe no signs of Big Nick.

"Take that gag out of my friend's mouth," were the first words he uttered.

"Sort of use to giving orders, eh?" grinned the man who had tripped him.

"Let the cub have a free breath," advised one of the men on the ground. "Besides, we shall want them to talk pretty soon."

"You miserable cowards to abuse him so," raged Stanley.

"Shut up!" warned the first speaker, slapping him across the mouth. Then, adding a curse, he said, "He wouldn't promise not to give you warning. Pretty soon he may refuse to give us some information, but he'll be glad to. So will you."

"You can strike me, because I am helpless,"



whispered Stanley, his face livid under the blow. "But untie me and you do not dare do it."

The man laughed, but not heartily, for there was something in the youth's face that caused him to pause and change his mind and lower his upraised hand.

"Let the cubs alone," growled one of the men on the ground. "Ye are too ready to knock people 'round 'fore it's necessary, Pete."

"Cut out using names, Joe," growled Pete.

The third man chuckled. "Better both on ye do it," he advised.

"Oh, I don't know," said the man called Joe; not seeming much disturbed. "I don't think these two will tell any tales on us. That is, Big Nick says they won't. Gave me his word of honor they wouldn't blab a thing." And he leered hideously.

"Which on ye cut Nick's head open?" asked the third man.

"I did," proudly answered Stanley, his eyes glittering. "And I would like to be turned loose with the same club against you three murderers."

"Ye would, eh?" growled the man, who had cautioned Pete to leave the prisoners alone.



"We'll make ye sing another tune in a few minutes. How's yer mouth, Sonny." The last to Bub.

"Didn't you know, Stanley, I never gave that signal," he asked, ignoring the man's query. "Couldn't you tell it wasn't my answer? It seemed as if my heart would break when you kept coming ahead and not suspecting any danger."

"I did suspect danger; or rather, I felt as if something had gone wrong," replied Stanley. "I knew the signal didn't sound right, but supposed the fault was with me."

"Shut up that chinning," commanded Joe.

"Three of the bravest fellows I ever saw," admired Bub, his face flaming with anger. "So brave they jumped me from behind, never giving me a chance to defend myself."

"We'll give ye a different sort of a chance pretty soon," grimly promised Pete.

"Let's eat," suggested the third man, rising lazily.

As he prepared bacon and potatoes, drawing on the cruisers' store for the bacon, Joe and Pete held an earnest consultation, frequently pausing to listen for some signal from the forest.

"S'pose we'd better stay here till Nick



shows up," finally remarked Pete in a tone that carried to the strained hearing of the pale faced youths.

"We stick right here. Either that old hound will come back, or else he's taken fright and is now being hunted by Nick. Lucky Nick found that campfire they thought they'd hid, and then located the lean-to!"

The youths knew that Abner was meant by "old hound" and each prayed fervently that he would escape capture.

"He won't stand a ghost of a show," continued Pete. "He hasn't any gun with him."

"How do you know he hasn't?" cried out Bub.

Pete grinned wolfishly. "Cause Nick found out ye only had two rifles when he first began stalking ye," he explained. "And here be both on 'em now."

"Let me warn ye," cautioned Joe with an oath," that if ye try to give any signal I'll cut yer throats." And he pulled out a murderous looking knife to accent his threat.

Even as he appreciated his danger Stanley was thankful that it was due to no error of his that the half-breed had found their trail. He was also thankful that none of the evil gang knew of his discovery in the woods. At first



he was tempted to whisper his secret to Bub, but feared that the latter by his expression would reveal his satisfaction and excite the men's suspicions. If that were done he believed they would resort to torture but that they would have the truth from one of them. So he closed his lips and kept his news to himself.

Evidently the men had no fear that either youth would call out and warn Abner, should the old man approach the camp. This was doubtless due to their knowledge that Big Nick was searching high and low for the veteran and was expected to find him.

"What will they do with us?" murmured Stanley from the corner of his mouth and so softly that none of their captors heard him.

"Leave us for Big Nick to finish," shivered Bub, hanging his head to conceal the movements of his lips.

"I'm afraid that we're in for it," murmured Stanley.

"I should say we are," replied Bub. "There is but one chance in a million that Noisy Charlie will come in time. I'd back him against the whole outfit."

"We can hardly expect him to arrive,"



agreed Stanley. Then resolutely, "We must try to escape."

"I'm tied so tight my blood can hardly circulate," groaned Bub. "If we escape it must be at night; that is, providing we are released from these trees."

"Them youngers are whispering," drawled the third man, busy with the coffee.

"Catch ye at it ag'in and I'll hurt ye bad," growled Pete, slouching up to them and scowling into their white faces.

"I was saying my blood has stopped circulating," replied Bub in a weak voice. "I guess I'm going to faint away."

Pete studied them for a moment undecided, and Stanley added, "Why can't you let us lie on the ground? We can't get away."

"What d'ye think, Joe? Shall I rope 'em up on the ground?" asked Pete.

Joe came over and examined the two critically. "Mebbe ye'd better. They'd be no use if they croaked before we've got what we want from them. Unhitch 'em."

It was a great relief to the youths to find themselves on their backs, although tightly bound. But in releasing them from the trees the men took care to separate them so that they could not converse without being overheard.



The three men ate heartily of bacon and potatoes and cursed their prisoners roundly for not having any flour in their packs. But they did not offer to give them any of the food.

"I'm hungry," defiantly announced Bub, as the three finished their meal and proceeded to light their pipes.

"Be ye?" drawled the third man, smoking with great relish. "It's a good sign in a boy or a hoss to be hungry. Shows natur' is trying to build up the system. Then by an' by ye'll feel thirsty."

"I'd like a drink of water now," said Stanley.

"There ye be," admired the tormentor. "That's a good sign. I know'd ye'd come to it." But he made no offer to give either food or drink.

As the evening shadows closed in on the little group the men became impatient. "It's too late for us to go gunning for the old hound. We'll have to trust to Nick. What say to putting in the beans?"

This seemed to meet with favor and soon a hole was dug in the ground and filled with wood. This was fed until heaped with coals and then Joe produced from under a bush a huge kettle filled with beans. Evidently the



villains had prepared to cook this at their original camp, but on finding traces of the cruisers had brought it with them. The kettle was snugly covered and buried in the coals and then packed over with earth.

“Thar!” admired Pete. “In the mornin’ that will be one of the best kettles of beans ye ever was denied a chance to taste.”

“Then you mean to starve us?” calmly asked Stanley.

“Mebbe yas and mebbe no,” slowly answered Pete. “It all depends on how glib ye talk in the morning. We are just trying to git ye into a sweet frame of mind so’s ye’ll answer a few questions. That’s all.”

“You all realize that you will pay a stiff price for this abuse?” warned Stanley, his jaw thrust forth as his fighting blood dispelled his fears.

All three laughed as if deeply amused. “What price can we pay, Sonny?” tantalized Joe between puffs. “Two younkers and a old man git lost in the woods and never come back. Who’s to blame?”

“So it’s murder, is it?” cried Bub. “You may kill us, but Noisy Charlie will have your scalps in return.”

The three men straightened and stared at



him angrily. "That is just the point we want to question ye about," informed the third man in a low, cruel tone. "We intended to wait till mornin', but I guess we can hold a term of court right now."

"Where is this Charlie?" asked Pete, his tone uneasy despite his attempt at carelessness.

"He's nearer than you think," jeered Bub. "I wouldn't be in your shoes for all the timber in Maine. My! but won't he walk it to you. They say he chased a man clear across to Manitoba once and—"

"Shut up, ye young devil!" roared Joe, hurling a stick of firewood at Bub. The missile left a red streak on the youth's forehead, and Stanley groaned aloud in mingled fear and fury. He believed Bub was to be murdered on the spot. But Joe was restrained from following up his assault by Pete, who advised:

"Take it easy. Don't let the cub rasp ye. Time enough to-morrer. They ain't been tied up long enough yet. Wait till mornin', when they ache in every limb and are dying for a drink of water, let alone some of our beans."

"You can kill us by inches, but we'll say nothing to help you," declared Stanley, passionately.

"Mebbe not; mebbe ye'll change yer mind,"



chuckled the third man. "Once we git the old hound I guess he'll talk fast enough to save ye."

Stanley remained silent, for he knew that while Abner would suffer any torture before he would tell his plans, the sight of either him or Bub being abused would loosen the old man's tongue.

"Now we'll go to roost," announced Joe. Saying this he dragged the boys in between him and Pete and tied a rope onto their arms and legs which in turn he passed around his and his companion's waists. This meant that if the boys sought to escape the least tug on the rope would arouse their captors.

"And if ye git uneasy in the night and wake me up by twistin' 'round I'll make ye sorry," warned Pete, savagely.

"I guess it's no go," whispered Stanley in Bub's ear as the two laid packed closely together.

"What worries me is Abner," murmured Bub. "He is either captured or else he knows what is up and is keeping low."

"Bub," gasped Stanley in a horror filled voice, "what if he should be—"

"Don't," groaned Bub. "Big Nick hasn't caught him yet, or he'd be coming into camp."



The fire the men made could be seen by that villain for a long distance. He'd climb a tree, and if he couldn't see it, he'd smell it. Abner is safe so far. But O! how I wish he had his rifle."

"Keep shut!" snarled Pete, giving Bub a vicious kick.

Bub winced under the blow, but gritted his teeth and made no sound. Stanley's eyes filled with helpless tears, and the two became silent.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### MRS. BRUIN PAYS A VISIT

THE morning broke warm and clear with the three men not awakening till long after the hour the true woodsman bestirs himself. The youths slept but little during the night and were softly whispering encouragement several hours before their captors showed any inclination to arouse themselves.

“They were drinking from a bottle last night,” murmured Bub. “They’ll get up feeling ugly. I’ve seen the stuff work at the mill. We don’t allow drinking there, but sometimes the men break over and they’re always out of temper when they sober up.”

As he finished speaking Pete gave a growl and turned over on his side. As this brought the rope tightly about his waist he began to kick vigorously, cursing in a sleepy voice all the while.

At the first sign of danger from the flying heels Stanley and Bub drew up their legs and Joe received several of the blows. Being incensed he kicked back and the situation began



to be serious till Bub let fly with his feet, crying lustily, "Hi, you two big cowards, want to kill us!"

This brought the men to their senses and still cursing they untied the ropes and staggered to their feet.

"What d'ye mean, ye young whelps, by kicking me like that?" bellowed Pete, drawing back his heavy boot for a blow.

"Your friend kicked you. We're black and blue from your brutality," protested Stanley. "If you intend to kill us, do it; but don't kick us to death."

"Shut up," snarled Pete, stirring the third man roughly. "Hi, Ben, git up."

Ben, like the other two, was in a nasty temper and swore roundly at Pete for calling him by name. "What ye didn't give away last night ye can be counted on to tell this mornin' he accused.

The three might have fallen-to and attacked each other, if Bub had not foolishly taunted, "There's mighty little we don't know about you. Jim Nace never sent a bigger pack of blunderers to do his dirty work."

The three stood and looked at each other in silence for several moments. Pete was the first to speak and there was something very



dangerous in his low, even voice as he said to his mates, "Boys, that settles it. It ain't a question of Nick having his way. It means state-prison for us if these brats leave the woods."

"Ye're right," agreed Joe, his brows black with evil passions. "I don't remember just what we let out last night, but we must have given the whole game away."

Up to this moment Stanley could not make himself believe that the men would kill him. What Big Nick might do if he returned to camp was the most serious problem on his mind. He feared brutality, especially if he refused to divulge anything they might ask for; but in the back of his mind he had not thought they would slay him in cold blood. Now the sweat stood out on his brow as he watched them. There was no violence in their behavior now; instead, they appeared grave and thoughtful. This mood he wisely decided was more to be dreaded than any exhibition of fiery temper. They had been harsh and abusive. Now they were filled with a common purpose: to escape detection. There was but one way they could do this; they must remove all witnesses. And, unappreciated by the youths, each of the villains realized that Jim Nace would disown them and



their acts should they fall into the toils of the law. This knowledge steeled them to cover their tracks at any cost.

"Forgive me, Stan. I guess I've settled it now," whispered Bub, his voice choked with sobs.

"Don't you mind, old man," soothed Stanley. "If you hadn't given it to them I should have. Anyway, we're not dead yet."

The men moodily prepared their fire and coffee, each seeming to avoid the eyes of the others, as if some fell thought would reveal itself should he raise his head. And yet each knew that his mate was asking himself the same question: How and when? Nor did this change in demeanor fail to carry its warning to the prisoners. Had the men raved and cursed each of the youths would have entertained the glimmer of a hope; but the grim silence, the brief interchange of inquiring looks, all foretold of a horrible plan.

At last, as the coffee was set aside and Ben was digging out the kettle of beans Pete quietly asked, "Shall we wait for Nick?"

"No," quickly replied Joe. "No need of having more in the game than is necessary."

"I say yes," spoke up Ben, taking the cover from the kettle and dipping the point of his



hunting knife into the savory beans to see if they were done to suit him. "He had the first grudge. We would only be actin' in self-defense; but if he's anxious to take the job off'n our hands, why not let him?"

"I guess them is my sentiments," slowly decided Pete.

"I'm willin' to go the whole hog," brutally announced Joe. "But if ye two think that way, why, I'll stand back. I only hope we won't be sorry fer waitin'."

"How can we be sorry?" scoffed Ben. "Any chance of their getting away? We'll be hearing from Nick almost any time now."

Before sitting down to their breakfast the men lifted Bub against a tree and tied him. "Let the t'other one wait till we finish," suggested Joe, returning to his coffee.

As the others were about to follow his example the report of a rifle held them transfixed like so many statues. Then came a long drawn out cry, like the scream of a lynx.

"It's Nick, and he's sighted his game!" yelled Joe, leaping to the rifles.

Instantly Pete answered the signal and armed himself. "Come on," he shouted to Ben. "We may head the old hound off if we work sharp."



"I'll stay and watch the brats," Ben offered, loath to leave his breakfast.

"We'll be back in a minute," cried Pete. "Take their guns and foller us."

With a sigh Ben appropriated the cruisers' rifles and disappeared in the woods at the heels of his blood-thirsty companions.

"Bub Thomas, if ever we had a chance it is now," cried Stanley, straining at his cords.

"I'm choking myself to death trying to work loose," gasped Bub, his swollen face bearing out his statement in part.

Groaning in mental as well as physical anguish Stanley rolled back and forth, struggling to release himself. "Oh, for an inch of freedom!" he sobbed. "If my finger was a bit longer I believe I could do it. It's cruel! cruel to be held like this."

"Oh, heavens, Stan!" sobbed Bub. "We've lost our one chance. They're coming back."

Stanley, bereft of all hope, caught the crashing sound in front of them. Suddenly he whispered, "It doesn't sound like them."

"Maybe it's Nick, sent back to do the work," shuddered Bub, now hanging very limp from the tree.

"The hemlock moves. Whoever it is he is very cautious," whispered Stanley.



Bub strained his head, but was unable to see the newcomer. Stanley, although prostrate on the ground, could see the bushes and ground hemlock moving as if the intruder was half decided not to advance.

“Bub!” he cried in a strangled whisper. “It’s a *bear*.”

Bub’s form became rigid as within his range of vision a large black bear appeared. Walking flat-footed and swinging its head from side to side the small fierce eyes were centered on the campfire. With a thrill of hope both realized that bruin as yet had not observed them, but was following up the odor of the pork and beans.

At another time the youths would have found a rich comedy in the bear’s maneuvers to obtain the coveted kettle. Fearing a trap, angry at the smoke and suspicious of the man-smell she timidly advanced and as often gave a snarling growl and awkwardly bounded back. Finally one hook of a claw caught in the bail and the kettle jumped from the fire.

This action on the part of the kettle instilled fresh alarm in bruin’s breast and she retreated half into the hemlock, rumbling savagely.

Stanley was hoping the men would return and be destroyed by the bear. Then the absurdity



of this wish was realized and he could find no hope of release from the unexpected intruder. Bub was concerned only with a fear that the bear would sight them and maul them to death. While knowing his fate had been decided by the three men, let alone Big Nick, he was tenacious enough to want to live till the last second.

Only the steaming smell of the kettle saved the boys from being discovered at the outset. But Mrs. Bruin, mindful of her cubs at home, and extremely fond of pork odors had nostrils for the kettle alone. It was hot, but now gingerly tipping it over some of the beans escaped and cooled and with a grunt of joy she gulped them down.

That first taste was so delicious that she cast caution to the winds and juggled the kettle deftly between her big paws in an endeavor to obtain more. But the beans were not so easily dislodged and beyond a few cupfuls she progressed slowly.

With her appetite keen set Mrs. Bruin was not inclined to be annoyed overlong. She announced as much in a deep throated growl as the kettle slipped to the ground. Then her eyes lighted cunningly and she slowly dipped her nose into the kettle. It was not as hot as she feared, that is the beans on the surface, and as



a huge piece of pork just tickled her nose she became desperate and with a strong push shoved her head through the opening and deep into the kettle.

But if the beans on the surface had cooled a bit, those beneath were steaming hot and with a roar of pain the bear opened her mouth and frantically tried to free herself. Her sensitive nose was being cruelly burned and the kettle fitted tight. Had she worked gradually, using one of her intelligent paws, and above all things had kept her mouth closed, the triangle of a face would have been drawn forth.

Being crazed by her burns and now thoroughly convinced it was a trap—as she should have known from the man-smell—she lost all idea of cunning and rearing on her hind legs began a mad dance about the opening.

“She’s going into the fire!” cried Bub, his eyes distending at the unusual spectacle.

His voice, coupled with her imprisonment, now caused the bear to lose what little sense she possessed after first being trapped, and with a mighty spring she fulfilled Bub’s prophecy and landed in the smouldering embers. Her muffled roar was changed to a scream of anguish as she danced clear of the coals. With a frenzied effort she jumped to



one side, her head striking a tree a smashing blow and breaking the kettle.

Finding herself free she gave another roar and plunged into the wood.

Stanley had held his breath as their visitor hit the tree beside his head and he sighed deep in relief as he beheld her departing.

"She's gone," choked Bub.

Stanley did not reply. His eyes were glued on to a piece of the kettle that had landed close beside him.

"Why don't you speak, Stanley? Did she step on you and kill you?" cried Bub.

"No," replied Stanley, not shifting his eyes. "I'm still alive. I am figuring on getting that piece of iron that is about six inches beyond my reach."

"Roll over to it," begged Bub, his face twisting to keep pace with Stanley's efforts.

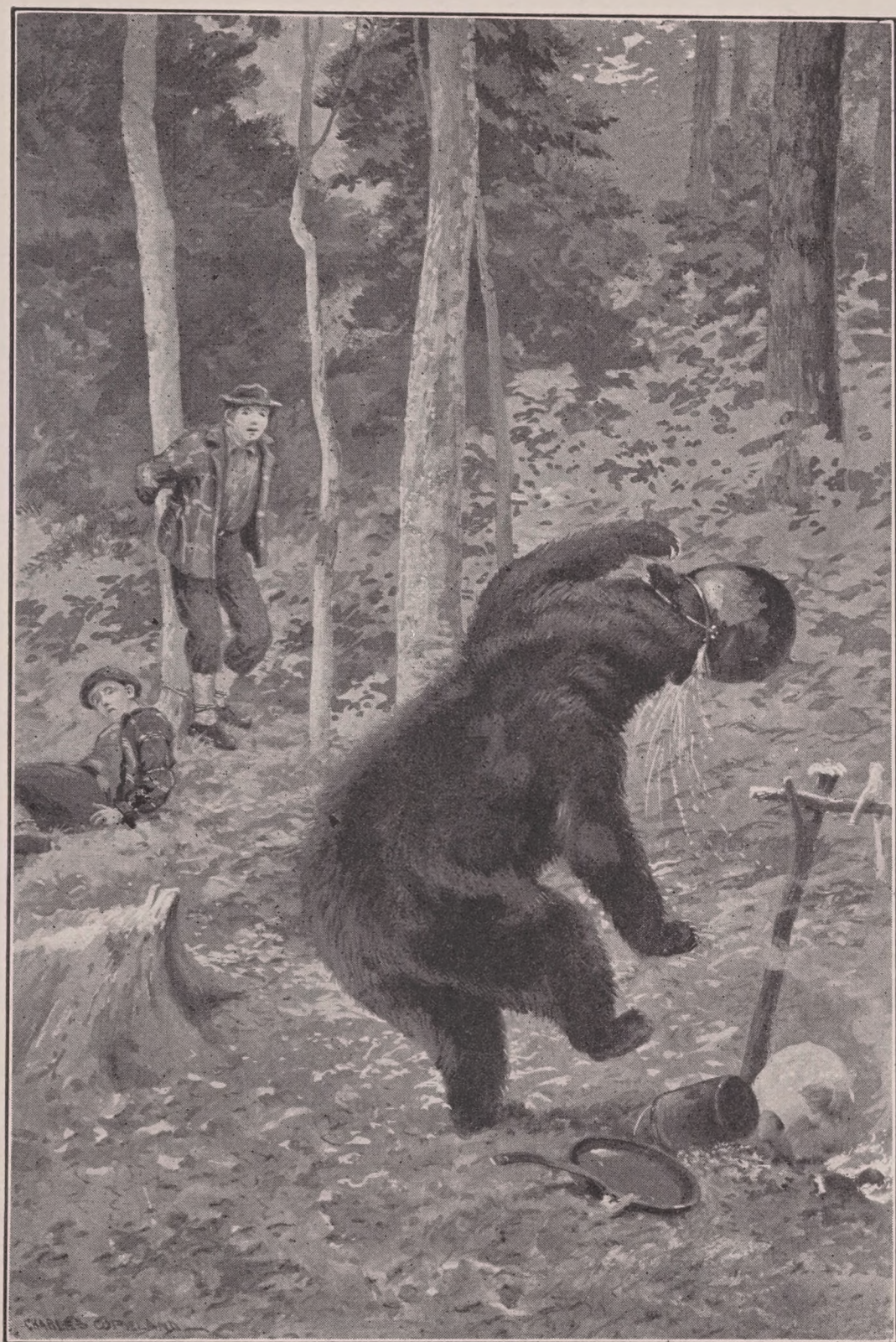
"If I could have done that I would have rolled into the fire long ago," panted Stanley. "They hitched one end of the rope to the tree."

"Go it, Stan! Go it," pleaded Bub, puffing out his cheeks and straining at his bonds as if that would help his perspiring companion.

"I—can't—make—it," groaned Stanley, ceasing his efforts.

"Stanley Malcolm, you can make it," re-





“She’s going into the fire !” cried Bub

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proached Bub. "I could make it if I had your chance. Even Abner Whitten could make it. A cripple could make it! Get that chunk of iron!"

With a sobbing moan Stanley threw himself madly forward, but instead of trying with his hands so shifted his position as to bring his face all but against it.

"NOW!" yelled Bub. "Get it!"

And with a final effort Stanley stretched his neck another fraction of an inch and worried the iron within reach with his lips. Then he went limp, exhausted.

But Bub was a hard taskmaster and he now urged, "Want them to return and kill us? Get busy with that iron."

"I'd like to work for you by the week," choked Stanley, fumbling the piece of metal between his fingers and assailing the rope.

"Not that rope!" warned Bub. "What are you wasting your time on that one for?"

"Who's doing this?" muttered Stanley, increasing his efforts. "I'm tied to the tree, I tell you. I can't come to you till I'm free."

"Forgive me, Stanley. But rush!" whimpered Bub, now on the verge of hysteria as he really believed they stood a chance of escaping.



With repeated strokes Stanley severed the cord and then rolled rapidly to Bub's feet.

"Can't you loose your hands?" whispered Bub.

Without replying Stanley brought his back against Bub's legs and began cutting the rope.

"Freeing my feet won't free my hands," reminded Bub, his eyes now fixed in the direction taken by their captors.

"Shut up!" muttered Stanley. "Hold still!"

"You're cutting my leg," timidly informed Bub.

Stanley made no response but increased his frantic movements. At last Bub announced "My feet are free. What next?"

"Curl them around me and help me to my feet," panted Stanley. "I can't reach the cord around my own feet and I can't get to your arms unless you help me up."

Bub caught his idea instantly and after several trials aided Stanley to a standing position. Leaning back against Bub, Stanley then felt blindly for the cord holding the hands imprisoned behind the tree trunk and sawed for his life.

An occasional groan warned him he was nipping the flesh, but without halting he continued. It was sweet music in his ears as Bub half-



screamed, "You've done it, Stan. You've done it!"

And in a few twists and turns he stepped clear of the tree. "Now give me that piece of iron," he grimly demanded, his jaw squaring as he glanced over his shoulder, fearing the return of the men even in their moment of victory.

"Knife in my pocket," hoarsely whispered Stanley, completely exhausted by his exertions.

In a second Bub had secured the knife and with three strokes was able to help Stanley to his feet.

For a few moments the two could do nothing more than hobble into the woods, so benumbed were their limbs. Had the men returned at that time they would have found it easy to run the youths down. Repeated rubbing finally allowed of a slow, awkward gait, but freedom was sweet at any price and the youths could only evidence their joy by silent pressures of the hand.

"Where to?" asked Bub, after they had placed a half a mile between them and the scene of their capture.

"We'll follow the men," doggedly announced Stanley. "If they've got Abner we'll make a try to release him."



"Good boy," approved Bub, heartily. "That's the way to talk. If they've captured Ab and find we've skipped they'll never expect us to come around their camp; and we'll snag Abner free or get caught ourselves. If I only had a rifle!"

"I shall always feel kindly towards bears," mused Stanley.

"And baked beans," thoughtfully added Bub.

"Why! that reminds me," gasped Stanley. "Why didn't we think to take some of the provisions? We left blankets, food and everything." And he halted irresolute. "Shall we go back and get them?"

"What!" cried the horrified Bub. "Go back there? Why, Stan, I'd die a hundred times out here in the woods first. You have a knife; let's cut two stout cudgels. They will be better than nothing."

"That's all I had when I hit Big Nick," reminded Stanley. "Then we can fasten the knife onto a pole and spear some fish. We won't starve."

"I should say not," cried Bub. "It's easy to get food in the woods. The only thing that worries me is where we can find Abner."

Stanley thought long and earnestly and then



suggested, "Wouldn't he try to lead them from the camp, fearing they would find us? If so he'd beat down the river. He'd never go up stream as the ridge would hedge him on one side. Besides, he wouldn't want to place the ridge between himself and us."

"That's just what he would do," heartily agreed Bub. "And, Stan, I must say I'm proud of you. You reason like a veteran woodsman. Not only would he go down stream to draw them from us, but also in a hope of meeting Noisy Charlie. O if he could only lead them within range of Charlie's rifle. The Injun would bag every one of them."

Despite their earnest conversation they kept a keen watch as they stole along, pausing frequently to listen. Once Stanley thought he heard the report of a rifle, but could not tell in what direction of the woods. When sufficiently removed from the camp Bub climbed several trees, hoping to get some clue of their enemies. On one of these occasions a rabbit, pursued by a lynx, broke through the woods and ran across Stanley's feet. Responding to his nerves he promptly emitted a yell that nearly caused Bub to lose his hold on his aerial perch.

"Wh—what is it?" he faintly inquired, fearing his friend had been recaptured, yet loyally



betraying his own position in order to learn the worst.

“Nothing but a rabbit,” answered Stanley, still trembling from his fright. “Hurry down. Another rabbit will scare me to death.”

“You can’t let out many more yells like that last one without attracting some unwelcome callers,” warned Bub, eager to lead the way from the spot.

“Would that sound carry far?” anxiously asked Stanley.

“Big Nick would hear it a half a mile away easy,” frightened Bub. “But he might not know what it meant; especially as he believes we are prisoners.”

Stanley again felt the strange sense of fear that had overcome him just before he was captured. Clutching Bub’s arm he whispered, “Let us conceal ourselves right here, somewhere. My nerves are all shaken to pieces. I feel as if we were in great danger.”

“That would be worse than foolish,” remonstrated Bub. “Let’s get away from here while we may.”

But Stanley was firm. “I must have my way,” he whispered. “I feel as I did when alone in the woods; as I did when I woke up and found Big Nick standing by me.”



This startling bit of information caused Bub's hair to stir at the roots and he protested, "If you talk like that you'll have me scared blue. Come, I'll find a hiding place."

It took him but a moment to select an ideal spot for concealment. With a sigh of relief Stanley crawled in beside him, after which Bub carefully arranged the growing things so that no clue to their presence would be afforded a keen-eyed passerby.

"If Hatton ever gets me out on a job like this again it'll be because I'm crazy," softly whispered Bub.

"Which reminds me," as gently informed Stanley, "I've found the old record. The company wins if we can get clear of this country."

"It's no time for joking," reproached Bub.

"I am not joking. I have found what Abner sought," earnestly assured Stanley.

Bub's eyes filled with tears. "Poor old Stan," he snivelled. "It's a shame. Don't think any more about it, old fellow. You'll feel better by and by. Try and go to sleep. You can rest your head on my shoulder."

"Do you think I'm crazy?" inquired the amazed Stanley.

"No, no," soothed Bub, to whom this seemed



the cruelest blow of all. "It's all right. You've done fine. Now try to go to sleep."

"Bub Thomas, if you keep on talking in that creepy tone I will go insane in earnest," snapped Stanley. "I'm not mad, you silly. I was trying to tell you what I found."

"Honest, Stan, do you mean it?" exclaimed Bub.

"I tell you yes, a hundred times, yes," repeated Stanley, now becoming irritated.

"Then you've made your everlasting fortune," announced Bub in an awed voice.

"If there is a fortune in it you and Abner and Charlie are equal partners," said Stanley sharply.

"But we didn't find it?"

"Well, you found me, didn't you? Now keep still while I tell you. For if anything should happen to me and you get back you can tell Hatton."

He then proceeded to give Bub a full account of his adventure with the beech tree. The thing that impressed Bub the most was Stanley's forethought in replacing the bark instead of bringing it into camp.

"For if you had brought that with you the gang would have killed us off hand," he declared firmly.



"I believe they would," admitted Stanley. "I tried to do what I imagined you and Abner would have done. And reason whispered 'Be careful.' "

"Reason wouldn't have whispered that to Bub Thomas," firmly said Bub. "I'd let out a whoop you could have heard down at Umbagog and waving it on high I'd run to camp and plump into the accommodating arms of Joe and Pete and Ben—may they all reach state-prison."

"Hush!" hissed Stanley, pressing Bub's arm. "I hear something."

Bub cocked his ear, but the wild throbbing of his heart deprived him of his usually keen sense of hearing.

Before either could make a tell-tale movement, or utter a betraying sound, the undergrowth just in front of their hiding place softly parted and they found themselves staring into the swarthy face of Big Nick.

Stanley's lips were opened to utter a wild cry, but Bub's hand brought him to his senses. They were in deep shadows and the half-breed had not seen them. It was obvious he had heard something that had aroused his suspicions, possibly Stanley's outcry when frightened by the rabbit. Both knew he was there



for a purpose by the manner in which his burning glance sought to penetrate the way ahead. After pausing for the fraction of a minute he disappeared as silently as he had come, and his path was towards the camp.

"He has learned we are prisoners and he's going back to pay off old scores," shuddered Stanley.

"That means he will strike our trail and be after us the minute he finds we have escaped," warned Bub. "He'll read the whole story of the bear and how we got free in a glance. Then he'll be after us."

"How much leeway have we?" whispered Stanley.

"Until he reaches the camp and takes his first look," replied Bub. "Now it's white-man's woodcraft against an Injun's. Come on."



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### THE TWO SMOKES

FOR the second time in his life Stanley experienced the sensation of being pursued by an implacable foe. To Bub all was well as long as he could maintain his lead; not so for his companion. The very knowledge that the cool, mysterious depths of the forest contained a man grimly following his trail unnerved the city bred youth in a degree, and although he believed Big Nick could not discover their escape for some time, yet he repeatedly glanced over his shoulder as if expecting to see the evil face. He began to appreciate how the rabbit must have felt when chased by the lynx.

Bub quickly understood his friend's mental plight and seizing him by the shoulder he whirled him about and drew him down on to a decayed log.

"What is it?" asked Stanley in a perturbed voice.

"Nothing; except we will wait here till you get your nerve back," calmly replied Bub, care-



fully shaping the handle of his club more to his liking.

“But we are wasting valuable time, precious time,” expostulated Stanley, starting to rise.

“We’re wasting time when you keep peeking back over your shoulder,” said Bub. “We’ll rest till you’re the same Mister Malcolm that had brains enough to hide the strip of beech bark and who was more level-headed than I was when we were tied up in camp. Now, my son, take this to heart: you are just as safe here, now, as that young spruce. Our danger doesn’t commence till Nick learns the truth.”

“But we should use that time in escaping,” protested Stanley.

“Not the way you’ve been escaping,” sharply corrected Bub. “You’re not escaping when you leave a swath of broken bushes, upturned stones, and heavy footprints in every dead log you come to. Look back there for fifteen feet. It looks as if a cyclone had passed here. Why, even a cow could follow us. Now, if you’re going on in that way, we might as well wait here and put up a fight before we’re exhausted.”

“I’ll be more careful,” promised Stanley, humbly.



“You think, then, you are ready to go on in a sane manner?” queried Bub.

Stanley smiled in a sickly fashion, and Bub slowly closed his knife and rose to his feet. “All right; we’ll strike off. A quarter of a mile between us and Nick, after we’ve moved carefully, is better than ten miles of that kind of blazing.” And he pointed in huge disgust at the obvious traces of their flight.

“To begin with,” continued Bub, “we’ll turn at right angles and double back towards Flat-top. Nick will follow us to this point on the run and will take it for granted we were pointed down stream, as we were. After we’ve gone back a half a mile we’ll turn again and go in our original direction, perhaps following the stream quite closely.”

Having learned his little lesson Stanley pressed his lips together firmly and endeavored to imitate his companion’s deliberate mode of traveling. To his relief he soon found the old fear deserting him and it was seldom that he looked back.

Although seeming to proceed aimlessly Bub in reality was exercising all the tricks of his craft, just as he would wish Abner to know he was doing. He bowed low and passed under, not through, obstructing boughs and dry limbs. He



stepped over, not on, the decaying logs, and his feet were careful not to leave a stone with the moss side downward. When encountering a small dead pool he took great care to skirt it at a sufficient distance to leave no footprints. After an hour of this kind of work he threw himself on a carpet of pine needles for a brief rest.

“How much farther do we go in this direction?” inquired Stanley.

“Only a short way. Just as soon as we clear this growth and find some hard wood I’ll climb a tree and get our bearings more exactly. Mister Nick will be puzzled, I opine, to decide where we vanished to.”

“He may think we made a broad trail purposely,” suggested Stanley.

“I hope so; he’ll be giving us credit for more brains than we possess,” grinned Bub. “No matter what he thinks it won’t help him any when it comes to picking up our trail.”

Emerging from the black growth Bub quickly climbed a large beech and studied the country for fully a minute in silence. When he descended he briskly announced, “No smoke anywhere. I’ve come a bit farther north than I had intended to, but not enough to make any great difference. We’re quite near the river.



In fact, I'm striking it too high up. If I thought there was any chance of finding a rifle in the scoundrels' camp by the river I'd risk cruising over there and making a try."

"They wouldn't leave their guns behind," opposed Stanley, who had no desire to encounter the villains.

As they were leaving the hard wood growth both experienced a fright when a flying squirrel passed over their heads in gliding from a maple to a stunted oak.

Bub looked sheepish as he apologized, "It's no wonder it scared you, but I ought not to have budged an inch. Guess I jumped three feet."

"I could look over your head, so I must have jumped higher," consoled Stanley. "The squirrel reminds me I haven't had anything to eat since yesterday noon. I'm faint."

Bub puckered his brows thoughtfully and admitted, "I feel empty under the belt, too. Wonder if you could manage to eat raw partridge?"

"No, no," protested Stanley, making a face.

"Then you can stand it a while longer. A man isn't starving till he can eat raw meat."

"I could eat with a relish a whole partridge if we had it and it was cooked," insisted Stanley.



"Most any man could," smiled Bub. "Perhaps we could run the risk of a small blaze at that. I could pick out some sticks that would make practically no smoke. Now, keep quiet and we'll see if we don't run across a booby." And he fingered his club eagerly.

Not many rods had been passed before Bub suddenly let his club fly and then darted after it with a low cry of triumph. He had knocked over a fine cock and by the time Stanley joined him he was finishing cleaning the bird.

"Now for a blaze, a very small one," he rejoiced. "Hi! not the pine. I've told you once that pine is a smoker. Let me do it while you cut some green sticks, alders will do, for toasting forks."

Under his careful manipulation a small bed of coals soon awaited their game. By the aid of several rocks he arranged the sticks so as to allow the divided bird to broil over the coals.

"We could hold them easier and cook the meat better," criticised Stanley.

"We could if we were to be here," agreed Bub. "But now that dinner is cooking we'll move back into the woods and hide up. Then if any of the blood-thirsty rascals should creep up to the fire they wouldn't find us at home. That clump of cedar bushes will do, only be



careful and not dig up the ground with your boots when you crawl under."

To Stanley's impatient mind it seemed that they had waited many minutes before Bub gave the signal to emerge. "You stay here," he whispered and I'll fetch the dinner. Then we can eat as we walk along."

In a short time Bub was back, triumphantly carrying the half-cooked partridge on a piece of birch bark. "Sorry we haven't any napkins," whimsically apologized the cook.

"If I had one I'd eat it," declared Stanley. "Please give me my share."

"There you are, my son, only don't bolt your victuals," cautioned Bub.

Stanley examined his portion with his nose wrinkling in disgust. "Why, it's covered with ashes," he complained. "And part of it isn't cooked at all."

"It is rather rare in spots," admitted Bub, taking a mouthful. "But it will keep us alive for a while. By this time to-morrow you'd be glad to eat the whole bird, feathers and all. Why don't you try? Things are never as bad as they look."

"This is; it's worse," grimaced Stanley, nibbling at a charred morsel. "Why! Bub, it



doesn't taste like the other partridge. Are you sure it isn't some poisonous bird?"

Bub chuckled heartily. "It's because it isn't seasoned. It is fresh, I'll confess. If we had a little salt it would help it along wonderfully."

"I can't eat any of it," decided Stanley, about to toss it away.

"Yes, you can," drawled Bub. "Think I'm going to kill game out of season, build a fire and run the risk of being murdered only to have you find fault with my cooking? Eat, my son."

Stanley obeyed, smiling faintly, and found that while the fowl was fresh it was not impossible as food and before he knew it he had devoured all the meat that even hinted at being cooked.

"If we're at liberty by nightfall I'll broil you a squirrel. It'll go better," encouraged Bub.

"Or we might catch some fish," eagerly added Stanley.

"You're planning out a regular hotel dinner," condemned Bub. "Besides, a fresh water fish, with no seasoning, is about the freshest thing you ever tackled. It's worse than partridge, for the bird lives on buds and the like and are sort of gamy even when eaten without salt. But a fish is just wishywashy. There isn't any expression to unseasoned fish."



More tree climbing now followed, Bub examining the direction of their camp as well as the ground ahead. "Not that I expect to see any signs of Nick," he explained, "but there might be one chance in a thousand that I could spy him on a ledge or in a tree."

"Will he climb trees?" cried Stanley.

"I never patented the idea," grinned Bub. "You must realize, my son, that by this time Mister Nick is very busy trying to find us."

"In other words we are again in the zone of danger," sighed Stanley.

"Yes, if you mean by that we are being hunted," replied Bub. Then in deep admiration, "My, but I wish I could talk as you do, Stan. An education is a wonderful thing."

"You have improved a million per cent already," encouraged Stanley, speaking most sincerely.

"Do you really think so?" eagerly pressed Bub.

"I know so," returned Stanley, firmly. "You are as well educated as I am—better. You had certain loose habits of speech because you have lived with careless men. But you have no idea how you have dropped that habit. By the time we reach the mills you'll be giving me pointers."



Bub scornfully refuted this, but was immensely pleased, nevertheless. The ground now began to descend and Bub's face took on a worried look. "I hate to strike a swamp, or even moderate low land," he explained as he caught Stanley's inquiring eyes. "At this time of the year it will be wet and leave a trail like an open book. Wait, I'll climb a tree and see if there's a way around it."

He studied both sides of their course long and earnestly, but was compelled to announce: "The swamp runs from the river far inland. If not for meeting Nick we could beat back and go around it on the ridge. But that is too much of a risk and we must chance it straight ahead."

"We could take to the river. We have the canoe," reminded Stanley.

"Yes, if we wanted to escape from this region. But we're out to find Abner," said Bub.

"Never for a moment did I think of leaving here till we had found him," warmly declared Stanley. "I thought we might take to the canoe and drop down below the swamp."

Bub shook his head. "No go," he discouraged. "They'd pick us off inside of a mile after we'd landed, for they're hugging the shore to keep Abner inland. Our only chance



with the canoe would be to wait for night and try to shoot down in the darkness. Chances are we'd be spilled at that."

Lack of food and loss of sleep, together with their steady flight through the woods, was now beginning to tell painfully on both and mid-day found each little inclined to talk and walking doggedly.

At last Stanley gave a low cry of relief and threw himself on his face at the edge of the swamp.

"Hi, what are you up to?" demanded Bub, in a low voice. And he pulled his companion back.

"I want a drink. I'm all parched up," said Stanley. "For the last few hours all I could think of was springs of clear cold water."

"That's nothing," sniffed Bub. "I've been doing the same thing, only I thought of it in rivers. But you mustn't drink this."

"Is it poison?" asked Stanley, his face falling.

"Not poison," returned Bub. "The waters in Maine are not poison, not any of them. But this isn't what you'd call wholesome. It wouldn't kill you, but it might make you sick. Of course there isn't as much chance for that



as there is later in the season, but we'd better drink of the best so long as we can."

"But where is the best?" eagerly inquired Stanley, still eying the silent pool lovingly.

"Right here, after I've put in my filter plant," explained Bub, beginning to dig a hole near the swamp.

"A well, eh?" mused Stanley. "Will you have time to finish it?"

"It'll be done in a minute. Here, take the stick and go at it. Then I'll spell you. I won't try to polish it off as I would if we were to stop here."

Their united efforts soon resulted in quite an excavation and Stanley was surprised to see it fill with water. Only the water was muddy; and he observed, "That's worse than the other. I'd rather drink from this little stream that's trickling away."

"That little stream is filling our well," replied Bub. "The original water won't kill you, but it would be like drinking a menagerie. Now we'll bail this out." And using his hat he soon emptied his small cistern.

Stanley was again surprised to observe the hole fill up with much clearer water, water that looked inviting. And without waiting for it to settle he leaned over and drank deeply.



“The first thing about Maine water,” informed Bub, after refreshing himself, “is that it’s cool. That helps a lot. And I never heard of any spring or stream up here that by nature is dangerous to drink. Of course a river is filled with typhoid fever germs where city sewers empty into it, but any stream that’s not been poisoned by man will never poison man in this state. Now, let’s be going.”

Nearly two hours were consumed in crossing the swamp, the youths often floundering up to their waists. Bub evidenced a fear of striking a deep hole and warned Stanley they must keep within helping distance of each other. Stanley replied with stories of quicksands he had read and Bub’s apprehension was increased to a high pitch before firmer footing announced they were leaving the mud and muck.

“Ain’t we a sight?” puffed Bub, as he halted and scraped the mire from his legs.

“I’ll wait till my mud dries,” shrewdly decided Stanley. “Then it will come off easier. I guess Big Nick could follow that part of our trail all right.”

“It will close up as smooth as ever in a short time,” said Bub. “Now, we’ll enjoy decent going.”

“I’m thirsty, awfully thirsty,” muttered



Stanley. "But I don't want to delay long enough to dig another well."

"We won't have to," cheered Bub. "Up there I see an Indian cucumber plant that'll answer nicely." And he pointed ahead into the woods.

Stanley curiously examined the slender stem, some two feet in height and girdled with leaves surmounted by more leaves and blue berries.

"See, it grows horizontally," said Bub, pulling it up. "Try it." Stanley did so eagerly and found it deliciously cooling. Bub found several more and before proceeding they had quenched their thirst.

"You can always find it in low woods," reminded Bub. "You fix it up with salt and pepper and serve it with trout and it's better than the real cucumber for me."

"What a wonderful place is the wood," murmured Stanley. "And what a wonderful thing is nature. I never realized until I came to Maine that one could get food in the wilderness unless he shot or caught it."

"In other words you never stopped to realize that everything we eat and wear springs from nature," smiled Bub. "That's because you've lived in the city, where everything you see is artificial. Your druggist sells you some medi-



cine, which may be nothing more or less than this little Canadian snake root, which finds a ready market." And he pulled up a small plant and held it at arm's length. "Back there at the swamp we made our way through the northern scouring rush, those three and four-footers you got so impatient with. A city chap coming up here to camp out would probably bring along soaps and scouring powders, not knowing that that rush is one of the best scourers and polishers you can find or buy. Why Stanley, the woods and fields are just filled with plants and herbs that will cure you of sickness or keep you from starving. We used beech leaves for your sprain after using the professor's liniment. The leaves alone would have fixed you all right. Now say you had inflammation; then we'd used that plant over there. It's nothing but common mullen, and you can always find it in an open spot. Noisy Charlie could doctor you for almost any illness just from what he knows of plants."

"I take off my hat to the Maine woods," humbly declared Stanley. "Instead of being a play-ground, or a lumber center I can now appreciate they are the backbone of the state. Everything depends upon them; water, food and clothing. But while I've been day-dream-



ing over this endless fairy-book you've been opening for me I'm reminded now to ask, What of Nick?"

Bub frowned. "It's time I was thinking of him," he admitted. "Wait till I shin up this tree. I can get a good look at our back trail."

Swarming up the trunk he paused but a second before he quickly slid back again. "I saw something move the rushes on the edge of the swamp," he whispered, his eyes suddenly dilating. "Let's leg it."

"Now, wait a bit, Mr. Thomas," calmly commanded Stanley. "We'll leg it, as you so elegantly put it, only after we've decided where we are going and why we are going. Be calm, my son, and get back your nerve before rushing away."

"It's Nick, I know it is," hurriedly whispered Bub, for some strange reason changing places with Stanley and now becoming the one to be calmed and encouraged. "He'll kill both of us."

"Possibly," agreed Stanley, surprised at himself as he failed to find any symptoms of nervousness in his system. "But he won't bag us while we are madly dashing in line with his gun. We'll have something to say about



dying." Then sharply, "Come, get yourself together. Brace up!"

"Stanley, you're the better man of the two, even in the woods," earnestly declared Bub, squaring his shoulders and setting his jaw. "You were nervous because it was new to you. You conquered that feeling. It was old to me and I pitied you; then I turn around and give way to it. I'm worse than a coward."

"Honestly, Bub, I believe that if I'd started in to show the white feather you'd have been as you were this morning," soothed Stanley. "When one's down the other is up, it seems."

"I had no business to lose my nerve," bitterly cried Bub. "Come, let's be moving. We'll have to double to the east and leave no trail. If he picks up the traces where we quit the swamp he'll believe we are striking dead ahead."

The afternoon sun was now casting long shadows across every opening while the warm rays occasionally caressed their backs as they silently fled before it. Tattling crows overhead cawed derisively at the two bowed figures and seemed to take a malicious delight in keeping pace with them and calling out to other wild kin that here were fugitives.



"Big Nick will know where we are because of those blamed crows," growled Stanley.

Bub halted and sounded the note of the owl and the nuisance faded away, only the sullen flapping of their wings indicating their course.

"If you could only drive all enemies away as easily," panted Stanley.

"Whew! Let's rest," said Bub, wiping the sweat from his brow. "If I'd known I was to be chased all over northwestern Maine by murderers I'd asked Hatton to raise my pay two dollars a week. I think it's worth it." And he grinned lamely.

"How much daylight will we have?" anxiously asked Stanley.

"In the woods here it will get dark early. Out of the woods we'd have the sun till about seven thirty-three. Then we have the moon till past midnight."

"Do we travel, or do we camp?"

"We'll take one more try from a tree top for the campfire of those scoundrels," slowly decided Bub. "Then we might as well rest up and cook some boobies. We can't get through to-morrow without food. And this chasing through the woods doesn't help us to find Abner."

"I don't see as we can stand much chance of



finding him unless he's captured and his captors' smoke tells where he is," pondered Stanley.

Bub nodded an affirmation and slouching his hat over his tired eyes staggered forward. As the black growth was interrupted by a patch of budding red maples he turned and frankly confessed, "I'm ashamed to say it; but I'm that tuckered I wish you'd do the climbing. All you have to do is to shin up to the branches, then get up as far as they'll hold you and sweep the horizon, first for a smoke, then for mountains. We've heard no guns and I hardly think Abner has been caught."

"He had no food and if Big Nick got on his trail he would have no chance to eat or drink," reminded Stanley. "I fear he's too old to last out against Nick. Anyway, I'll do the climbing."

Arriving at the top Stanley first examined the back trail, despite Bub's warning to look first for a smoke. He was thrown into a tumult to notice a rustling in the top of a maple a few rods back, and then sheepishly realized it was nothing but the wind.

Turning his eyes to the west he found that the low hanging sun blinded him till he learned the trick of properly shading his eyes.



"I can see nothing," he called down to Bub.

"Then descend," directed Bub.

"Hold! As I live, I can make out a thin streamer of smoke!"

"Point in which direction," cried Bub.

"Directly in the path of the setting sun," informed Stanley. "That is why I did not make it out at first."

"Hurry, hurry. We must make for it and learn the true situation," urged Bub.

"Why, Bub, I can make out two streamers of smoke, very near together, yet distinct. Ah! one is dying out now. Now there is only one."

"Hump yourself, Stan! They've caught Abner!" yelled Bub, regardless of any danger in the rear. "They've nailed him and he's managed to start a blaze near their campfire, hoping we'd see it. It's the two smokes, meaning he's in trouble. They caught him at it and put out his smoke. But they were not quite quick enough. Now, my son, if ever you hustled and acted the part of a woodsman now is the time for you to distinguish yourself."

"Take the lead," grimly directed Stanley, tightening his belt to the last notch. "You'll find me at your heels. We'll rescue Abner, or give ourselves up as prisoners."



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### HOW ABNER FARED

ON leaving the two boys Abner had no definite purpose of making any extensive investigation of the enemies' stronghold. Disgusted with his failure, gloomy because of the rain and hungry for some of Noisy Charlie's cooking he felt much out of sorts and plunged into the wet woods to relieve his feelings.

But as he proceeded and drew nearer the strange camp his old curiosity as a cruiser returned and he speedily forgot his damp clothing and wet feet. At times he believed he could smell the acrid reek of the burning wood, and, halting, would sniff the air keenly.

Possibly he had covered two-thirds of the distance when with his mind on the camp and believing the strangers would not be abroad in the storm he stepped boldly into a small glade and found himself staring into the surprised eyes of Big Nick, only eight or ten rods away. If the half-breed recovered his presence of mind in a second he was a shade behind Abner, who with one spring vanished into the woods. The



half-breed knew he now had a foeman worthy of his cunning and would have hesitated to stalk his aged foe if not for the knowledge that the cruiser had no rifle. And following Abner's example he gained the cover of the forest noiselessly.

Then commenced a strange game of hide and seek. Abner would not retreat in any straight line, as he knew he must keep from the other's keen view. If exposed for only the fraction of a second he realized the half-breed would shoot, and shoot straight. Thus for nearly an hour he passed like a shadow from tree to tree, never seeing his pursuer and remaining unseen in turn. Yet each sensed the other's presence and realized that at times they were near neighbors. The dripping of the rain, the croak of a frog in some nearby pool, the occasional note of some songster in the open, as the sun threatened to return and flood the wood and heights with warmth, were the only sounds to be heard in the narrow compass of their dodgings and twistings.

The one idea in Abner's mind was to remain concealed till night should blanket his movements; then he must silently make his camp and warn the youths. On the other hand he was continually tormented by a fear that one of the



boys would set out after him, or by some lack of caution advertise their presence. In that event he must adopt a different programme and lead his foe away towards the river. Had he known, as he glided from bush to trunk, from rock to clump of cedar, that already Bub was a prisoner and that Stanley was about to fall into the same clutches it is probable that he could have escaped the half-breed.

But his camp was the magnet that held him hiding about one small circle, ever hoping for an opportunity to fly off at a tangent and rescue his young friends from possible capture. This mode of procedure puzzled the half-breed. It resulted in his overestimating the prowess of his opponent. He feared that Abner might be armed with a revolver, or be planning some coup by which he would win the victory. Because of this error the half-breed did not press matters as he otherwise might have done. Had he known that his white friends had captured Stanley and Bub he would have understood the cruiser's maneuvers and would have governed himself accordingly.

Thus the two passed back and forth, now seeming to lose an advantage, now believing one was gained. At last the shadows thickened and drawing a deep breath Abner dropped to



the ground and with incredible quickness and quietness wormed his way some distance towards his camp. Then half rising he took advantage of a dense growth, skirting it so as to place a barrier between him and Big Nick. It was some minutes before the half-breed realized the cruiser had changed his tactics and was trying to break away. Even then he hesitated to follow, fearing some subterfuge of the white man.

By the time he had circled the woods and had decided upon the general direction taken by Abner the latter was speeding like the wind for camp. As he neared it, he slowed his pace from habitual caution and for several seconds studied the back trail. Even if the half-breed should appear now he believed he could decoy him away from the camp, providing the youths in no way revealed their presence. But the half-breed was some distance back in the forest and finally Abner stole ahead.

As he reached the beginning of the clearing where the camp was pitched he thought he heard voices. Suspicious of all he did not quickly understand, he resumed his former secrecy of movements and stole forward as stealthily as if reconnoitering the camp on the river.



He groaned half aloud as his quick eyes caught the form of Bub tied to the tree and then beheld Stanley also a prisoner. Could he have exchanged places with his companions he would have done so gladly, let the price be what it might. As it was he was unarmed, with a deadly enemy dogging his tracks. Although he could not effect the youths' release he believed the half-breed as yet knew nothing of their capture. This being so it was still possible for him to lead Big Nick far down the river. He did not believe the white men would seriously injure the boys, and once he had succeeded in decoying the half-breed down stream he might find a way to double back and effect their release.

Nor did he forget to figure as a possible asset—even as Bub and Stanley had shrewdly anticipated—a meeting with Noisy Charlie.

“I ain't even got a jack-knife,” he groaned as he found he had left that important article beside the slab of bacon in camp.

Then fearful of Nick's arriving and discovering his friends and the two prisoners Abner shook a withered fist at the trio of scoundrels and darted back to meet and divert the half-breed. Impelled by a fear that he had been instrumental in bringing the half-breed and the



youths face to face he spurned all caution for the first half of a mile and dashed along recklessly. At last he paused and wiped his flushed face and began to hope that perhaps he was in time after all.

Ahead some old growth pine towered more than a hundred and fifty feet towards the heavens. It was a wonderful spectacle even for such an experienced woodsman as Abner and at another time he would have stared long and longingly. Just now he could think only of the youths' danger and the ancient pines interested him in but one particular. They afforded a long range of vision. One could look down their majestic aisles for a great distance with the gaze unobstructed by any undergrowth. It was as if he were in an immense cathedral.

As he searched his imposing surroundings his pulse beat a trifle quicker. It seemed as if he had caught a glimpse of a shadow flitting from trunk to trunk far ahead.

"If that's Nick I guess I'll stick pretty close to this five-foot trunk," he murmured. "After he's passed I'll let him know I'm here. But, by jing! this is a bad place to dodge a man armed with a rifle." And he surveyed the wide open places, the smooth carpet of pine needles, in dismay.



However, Abner Whitten was not one to count the costs when aiding a friend and he drew himself up against the trunk and became motionless. Almost before he could sense it Big Nick passed him, seeming to move on wings, so noiseless were his moccasined feet. With equal stealth Abner revolved around the tree, keeping the trunk between him and his pursuer. It would not do to give a tell-tale sign of his presence just yet; again, he was in an agony of fear that the half-breed would detect the camp if allowed to advance much farther.

“Wal, if it’s got to be done, here goes.” With this desperate exclamation he quickly darted along his avenue of retreat some distance before allowing a dry branch to crackle under his foot.

As if worked by mechanism the half-breed wheeled and raised his rifle. There was nothing to be seen. Vanishing behind a tree trunk he crept tiger like towards the unexplained sound. As he did so his bead-like eyes caught a fleeting glimpse of a human form flashing from view. Uttering a guttural note of triumph he cocked his rifle and sped towards the point where his proposed victim had disappeared. His next note was one of rage, for as he believed he had the veteran cruiser at his



mercy and was gloating as he pictured him crouching helpless behind the tree just in front, another stick snapped off to the left and again he was afforded a glimpse of a disappearing form.

He knew it was Abner. No one else in that neighborhood could so escape him, and baring his strong teeth in a snarl he set himself to work to run down this will-o'-the-wisp. He began by running with the speed of a deer towards the point where he last saw his prey. He now was convinced that the cruiser was unarmed. Believing this he devoted all his energies to overtaking the fugitive.

But Abner seemed as evasive as a whip-po'-will. He could be seen just for a second and occasionally heard, but there was no drawing near enough to shoot him. The half-breed had the advantage in years and strength and could make three feet to Abner's one, but the veteran had the advantage of being in the lead. He was called upon to waste no time in deciding what course he should take; to the contrary the half-breed was often puzzled which way to turn. He usually discovered the right direction by a timely view of Abner's back. But so soon as he arrived at that point he would sight his quarry far off to one side. Once he cunningly



endeavored to anticipate such zigzag maneuvers by running parallel to the line he believed Abner would follow. But this time Abner, as if possessing the power to read his pursuer's mind, held on straight ahead and gained a great distance.

The half-breed was convulsed with rage as scheme after scheme proved of no avail. To do his best he could only catch an occasional glimpse of the fleeing man, and never one sufficient to warrant a shot. Sometimes he suspected Abner was playing with him, and the thought was maddening. A dozen times he halted and raised his rifle, intending to shoot the moment the cruiser should show an inch of his person. In each instance Abner flashed into view in an unexpected quarter and was gone before the trigger could be pulled.

These repeated failures washed everything from the half-breed's mind except his desire to kill the cruiser. He even forgot his grudge against the youths in his passion to prove he was a better woodsman than this stoop-shouldered man, so nimbly evading him at every turn.

The old-growth now gave way to a tangle of smaller evergreens and Big Nick cursed fluently under his breath as he realized he had lost a



golden opportunity. His only hope now lay in running the old man down. If he could tire him out he would have him at his mercy. He redoubled his efforts as he noted Abner's course was ever towards Briar stream. This led him to deduce that Abner was making for a canoe and had hopes of escaping him by water. It might also mean that in the canoe was a rifle; for it must be remembered Big Nick as yet knew nothing of the boys or their camp.

This last theory seemed very plausible to him and he made directly for the stream, intending to follow down its bank and intercept Abner, or overtake him before he could arm himself.

But from that moment Abner, for the night at least, was lost to him. Had he known that the veteran was exhausted from his fearful exertions and need of food he would have rested easier. Not knowing this he prowled along the river, made detours through the silent woods, and in every way sought to locate his victim.

It was just as he was giving up his search and was about to retreat to the camp up stream, his heart filled with bitter rage, that Big Nick again sighted his prey. Abner, lame and sore from his night in the woods, was painfully limping, not down stream, but back to-



wards Flat-top. Apparently he believed he had fooled his pursuer and was now beating back to aid his friends.

With a hoarse cry of joy Nick renewed his pursuit. Again some mysterious power told Abner he was being chased, and fighting off his stiffness he renewed his tactics of yesterday. But the half-breed rejoiced as he observed the veteran was not moving with his usual sprightliness. More than once the rifle was sighted, only to be lowered with a cruel smile as Nick decided he had the game in his own hands and preferred to play with his man as a cat torments a mouse.

When Abner realized this fact, his mouth set in stern lines. He was exhausted and must be captured, he told himself. It simply remained to see how far he could lead the dark-faced foe from the neighborhood of the camp.

"I'd give anything if only Charlie could pop out and take charge of this affair," he groaned as his foot twisted and a sharp pain shot up his leg.

It was at this juncture that by a desperate effort he appeared imbued with the strength and elasticity of youth, and heedless of his aching ankle led the half-breed a furious chase for nearly a fourth of a mile. Enraged, and



believing that he had been tricked by a cunning counterfeit of exhaustion, he raised his gun and fired, just as Abner gave up the fight and fell face downward. It was then that the long-drawn-out cry was sounded and was heard by the men about to sit down to their breakfast.

Several repetitions of the cry at last brought Pete, Ben and Joe to the spot and they swore roundly that Big Nick was the greatest man-tracker in the woods.

“And to think we’ve got ’em all. Hey, old hound?” and Pete struck his hat into Abner’s face.

“I’ll see ye behind an iron grating fer that, my lad,” informed Abner in a low voice.

“Ye will, eh?” grinned Pete. “Wal, ye’ll have an eyesight that will look from a grave up here way down to the city then.”

Big Nick was standing like a piece of stone, his nostrils dilated. “You say all?” he asked, his deep voice trembling in its eagerness.

“Sure. We’ve got the kids trussed up at the southeast end of Flat-Top. Found ’em in camp there.”

Big Nick turned to Abner, his eyes glittering evilly. “You dog me away so I no find um. I pay you for that.”



“Ye’ll do mighty well to pay fer yer own debts, ye black-hearted skunk!” shouted Abner. “Of course I dogged ye from them. Hi, ye fellers. D’ye know I’ve had this poor fool on the string all yesterday afternoon and all night. If I hadn’t hurt my ankle I’d be fooling him now. And me an old man with no weapon. That’s the kind of a cur he is. He couldn’t even catch me. Bah! ye a woodsman? Why, ye tanned thief, ye couldn’t find Rangeley plantation ’less ye was led to it.”

The men laughed at Abner’s ridicule, but the half-breed bit his lips till they bled. Then he smiled fiendishly and said, “I bring boys here. I make you say good things about Big Nick. I make you say anything I ask.”

“Say, if that ain’t the Injun of it,” admired Pete. “He’s going to torture the kids till the old feller prays to him.”

“I won’t stand for that,” muttered Ben. “Nothing like that. We’re in bad enough without any extries. Fer my part I don’t care to have them younkens brought here. I left them alive and well, and well supplied with provisions. Guess we’ll call it quits as far as we’re concerned.”

“Ye miserable hounds! ye’re going to send that black devil back there to murder ’em!”



shrieked Abner as he caught the significance of Ben's declaration.

"Easy, easy, Mister Man," grinned Pete. "We ain't hired to protect strangers in these woods. We left the young men in good condition. We're not to blame if a half-breed uses 'em up."

"Ye'll git a life sentence fer it, mark me that. And if the men at the mills git at ye first ye'll swing, even if they don't hang fer murder in Maine."

"Is that so?" laughed Joe. "And who's going to tell on us?"

"I be," roared Abner.

"Tie his arms and drag him along," directed Pete. "We'll camp over on the ridge. Joe, explain to Nick what he can and what he can't do. No bringing the kids to us, ye know."

With head bowed Abner stumbled along with his captors. He had no doubt but what to save themselves from a state-prison term they would kill him. He would have been glad to promise to drop the whole matter if they would only release the boys. He would have kept the promise, but he knew it was idle to make it, as they would never believe him. To them there was but one way out; the cruisers must never



leave the woods, and what the outside world never knew, never happened.

He sounded them, asking why they "tied up" with a half-breed when he could give them well paid employment with his company.

"We've got a good boss," grinned Joe.

"Shut up on that. We have no boss," warned Ben.

"Ye needn't try to cover up. Jim Nace is yer boss, but even he, as bad as he is, never meant ye should do murder," cried Abner.

"Will ye keep yer mouth shet, or shall we do fer ye right here?" hissed Ben.

"And to think ye are fools enough to trust the half-breed, while he'll throw ye over in a second," sneered Abner.

"He might if he got mad with us and had a chance to blab," agreed Pete.

"Meaning ye'll put him out of the way if necessary?" queried Abner.

"I don't think he'd be missed very much," laughed Joe.

Abner said no more. The men talked openly before him, as if realizing what they said would never be carried further. After camp was pitched the veteran fell into a doze and did not wake till late in the afternoon. In the meanwhile one of the men had repaired to the camp



on the river and had brought back some supplies. None had suggested going to the boys' camp, nor did any of them appear willing to discuss the youths. Food was offered to Abner but he paid no heed. If his companions had been done away with he had no desire to live. And his head fell on his breast and his eyes remained half closed.

In the middle of the afternoon he heard a shout and looked up and beheld Big Nick. His hair bristled as he believed he was gazing on a double murderer. And he scarcely could believe his ears when Nick hissed, "Boys git away. No catch um."

"What!" screamed Abner staggering to his feet, for only his arms were tied. "What! the younkers escape? Hooray! Glory! Kill me, do anything to me, ye pack of thieves and murderers—but my boys has escaped! Whoop!"

"Silence!" growled Pete, advancing on him with a knife, while Ben asked:

"And ye mean ye couldn't run them down?"

"No catch um," muttered Big Nick. "Little weasel sly like old fox here." And he glared at Abner.

The three men eyed each other in consternation. If the boys remained at liberty it would



be unsafe to deal harshly with Abner. If even one escaped the bloodshed would have been in vain.

“Wonder if that Injun is trying to throw us?” whispered Joe.

“How fer did ye chase them, Nick?” inquired Pete.

“All over. All day. No find. Come here to git help. Catch um easy when all help.”

“Did they come this way?” eagerly inquired Ben.

Nick nodded. “Come this way. Hide over there,” and he pointed to the east. “Need men beat up woods and scare um out. I watch on edge and catch um.”

Abner’s heart trembled within him. If the boys blundered on to the camp all was lost. If he could but warn them he was a captive he believed Bub would go down stream and meet Noisy Charlie. And his eyes roved desperately about the camp.

Regardless of betraying their presence Ben had heaped on some pine which was now sending up a tall column of yellowish smoke. Abner’s eyes brightened. If Bub only remembered to climb trees he would see the smoke and should know it was made by the enemy.

“But if there was two smokes he’d know I



was a prisoner; fer he'd have brains enough to know I never git lost and that it must mean trouble. And he'd also figger out that I'd never call on him fer help, and consequently he must argify that I want him and Reddy to steer clear of this neighborhood. Now lem'me figger a bit."

His idea of figuring was to carelessly brush some pine kindlings and bits of green boughs into a heap with one foot while the men were earnestly laying their plans for re-capturing the two youths. After he had accumulated what he believed to be a sufficient pile he drew near the fire and idly rearranged the brands with a foot. Then in turning away he kicked a burning brand smartly towards his individual pile. None of the four noticed him, and with no show of haste he carefully forced the brand beneath the mass and rejoiced to see how it caught hold.

But his task was not yet finished. The fire must be allowed to burn awhile. Quickly skirting the group he forced his way between Ben and Joe and gesticulating with his head so as to hold the attention of all he commenced a violent harangue, taking care to use no abuse that would incite them to stop him.

Wildly and vaguely he talked on, Big Nick as



well as the others staring at him in open-mouthed amazement. "And I tell ye, and I believe it, that there are diamonds there. Now listen," and he leaned forward to invite secrecy and mechanically the four gathered close, for his mention of precious stones held their attention. "I know there is gold there. I've seen it. Great big flakes and nuggets." His voice now sank to a whisper, but as he caught the increased crackle of his signal pile he elevated his tones again, loudly crying, "And that gold is enough to make ye all rich."

"What's the matter with him? Is he crazy?" gasped Pete.

"No I'm not crazy. I'm talking of gold, carloads of it. And hatfuls of diamonds," shrieked Abner, seeking to destroy the warning noise of the second fire.

"Out up here," gravely announced Nick, tapping his forehead.

"I'm not out up there," denied Abner in a passionate voice. "I tell ye I know where Jim Nace makes counterfeit dollars. I know where he has a place not more'n ten miles from here where he keeps his silver and gold hid. And with it he makes his money. There! that's news fer ye, eh?"

He was compelled to pause for want of breath,



and Nick's quick ear caught the sound of an unusual crackling. He turned and beheld the fire and with a growl sprang to it and kicked it to pieces.

"The old hound did it to signal the kids!" howled Pete, striking Abner to the ground with one blow of his brawny fist.

It was at this moment that Stanley saw the second smoke fade away from his perch in the tree top.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### THE END OF THE CHASE

THE sun was about an hour high when the two youths halted within a few hundred feet of the enemies' camp. Great caution was now necessary and Bub dropped on his hands and knees and motioned for Stanley to follow his example. Owing to the intervening blackgrowth the conversation of the four men was audible several minutes before they were seen.

Abner had crawled to his feet, and as his young friends silently wriggled their way through the last barrier and were afforded a view of the scene his captors were busily tying him to a tree and showering him with curses.

But Abner's spirit was indomitable, and as if to give the boys warning, should they be within the reach of his voice, he loudly called, "Ye won't git them younkers. They've seen my smoke and will know enough to keep away. Put that in yer pipe and smoke it."

"Ye will have it now, will ye?" raged Pete, raising a hatchet.

"Take it easy," restrained Ben, catching the



uplifted arm. "He can wait till we've undone his mischief. He's safe; let's strike out fer the brats."

"Good," endorsed Nick. "Leave old man here. Git boys. I catch um. One help me."

"Guess ye'd better go with him, Pete," advised Joe. "Ye seem to need coolin' off a bit. Ben and me will stay here and watch this feller."

Pete grumbled and hesitated, evidently inclined to remain in camp, but as the half-breed became impatient he picked up a rifle and fell in behind him, saying, "We'd better separate and beat the woods in a straight line east. They won't go up stream, and they won't come here if they've got brains enough to read that old hound's signal. If they do come here Ben and Joe 'll git 'em."

Nick grunted an approval, and deploying entered the woods a rod or two beyond the two young spies. Pete passed within a few feet of him and both the youths were grateful that he and not his companion had taken this line.

Bub nudged Stanley exultingly. "That leaves only two," he ventured to whisper. "I'd rather all three were left than to try to outwit Nick alone."



"How far will they go?" nervously asked Stanley.

Bub's face fell. "That's so. Night is coming on and Pete won't wander around in the dark. He's no woodsman; that is, nothing like Abner."

"I was thinking they might find some trace of us and suspect we were near the camp," explained Stanley.

"That's possible—almost probable," groaned Bub. "Well, my son, it means that if we're going to do anything for the Whitten family we've got to do it pretty quick."

But think as they could they could decide upon no plan that would warrant success. They were two boys against two men. They were unarmed, except as they had clubs. Each of the men was caressing a rifle and listening intently for some note of victory from the heart of the woods.

"If they were near cover we'd creep around and crawl up behind them and risk taking them by surprise with the clubs," muttered Bub, his face white and desperate.

This move could hardly be considered, however, as Ben and Joe were some distance from the tangled growth and on their guard.



Abner, lashed to a small maple, rested his chin on his breast, apparently overcome.

"Wonder if they'll catch 'em," growled Ben, shifting his rifle.

"Guess so," returned Joe, shortly, evidently not in the mood for conversation. Then he added after a brief silence, "I never fancied this job."

"Chicken-hearted, eh?" grinned Ben.

"No, I ain't chicken-hearted," retorted Joe angrily. "But when I work fer a man I like to feel he'll back me up in anything I do. We both know that the boss would turn us down in a second if it suited his plans."

"He pays well," reminded Ben calmly.

"I don't know about that," demurred Joe. "If it means state-prison if we're caught I don't call any amount of money good pay."

"But we ain't caught yet."

"That's just it," exploded Joe. "We take all the chances and if we win out we're paid, the boss asking no questions. But if we're caught he'd go back on us in a minute and swear he knew nothing about us. That's what sores me. Besides, the Great Northern ain't the kind of a machine I like to fool with. Take a small operator, like Blusby, when we got his—"



"Shut up!" hissed Ben. "Want to tell everything ye know?"

"But who's to give it away if ye're so sure we won't be caught?" cunningly countered Joe.

"That ain't the idee. Once a thing is done, let it remain buried. I never rake old coals onto the fire," replied Ben.

"Say, ye two varmints. Going to kill me on a empty stomach?" cried Abner, raising his head. "Don't ye realize I ain't had anything to eat fer several weeks? If ye keep on this way I shall die nat'ral-like and ye'll miss all yer fun."

"Ye'll live long enough to suit us," grimly assured Joe, scowling maliciously at the veteran.

"Ye might bribe us with some of them pearls and gold ye was telling us about," taunted Ben.

"Both on ye will look mighty smart in stripes," mused Abner.

Before either could answer this with blow or curse a rifle echoed far off in the woods, and even as the men straightened and stared in the direction of the sinister sound there came another report.

"That settles 'em," muttered Ben, rising to his feet, his hands trembling as he toyed with the rifle.



Joe's face blanched as he believed the tragedy had been consummated, and his voice was unsteady as he added, "There's no drawing back now. Anyway, we ain't in that."

Abner's eyes were two glistening points as he hoarsely cried out, "Ye'll answer fer it just as if ye fired the cursed bullet." Then bowing his head he sobbed convulsively.

The two paid no heed to his words, for already an awful fear was stealing over them. Each wished he had never encountered the situation and neither dared look at the other at first. Then the desire to escape returned and they gazed at Abner wolfishly. As Joe had said, there was no drawing back for them and their liberty depended upon no witnesses reaching the settlements.

The youths stared at each other in wonder and amazement as their quick ears caught the two reports.

"They must be shooting at shadows," whispered Bub.

"I don't understand it," puzzled Stanley.  
"But we must make some kind of a move."

Bub started convulsively. Then warned, "Don't budge if a wasp gets at you. One just stung me on the hand. We must have picked a place right under their nest."



"One stung me," gritted Stanley. "We can't remain here and be stung to death without making a noise. Let's crawl back."

"Wait," murmured Bub. "I see the nest. Keep quiet and we won't be troubled. See that gray bunch in the tree about the size of a hat. That's it."

He was pointing to the tree in the middle of the opening, under which Ben and Joe were standing. Even as he indicated the dark grey bunch the men sank to the ground again.

Stanley thrilled in every nerve and his voice was hard to control as he suggested, "If only we could get those fellows after the scoundrels we might have a chance to slip in and free Abner."

"Great!" chattered Bub. "But how to do it?"

"Find a small rock and smash the nest," hoarsely advised Stanley.

Without a word Bub silently worked his way backwards and was gone nearly a minute before he returned, holding several fragments of stone in his hands. "Retreat a few feet," he murmured, "and we'll have a chance to stand up for the throw."

In a few seconds Stanley had rejoined him in



a little bower, opening on the camp at one side. The nest was plainly visible.

"It all depends on the one throw," warned Stanley. "If you miss the men will be on their guard. The first shot must hit and bring out a swarm of wasps before the brutes know what is up. The second that happens one of us must be ready to dash forward and cut the ropes."

"I can't do it," groaned Bub. "I'd miss. My hand is shaking so I can hardly hold the rock."

"You must," commanded Stanley. "Brace up. I'll steal around and be ready to make the dash. Lucky I've my knife."

"No, Stan; it won't do," whispered Bub. "You must do the shooting and leave the rescue to me. I can do that better than you; but I can't hit the nest. Take the stones."

"Very well," quickly agreed Stanley. "I'll play the nest is second base and I'm nailing a man trying to steal from first. How long will it take you to get around behind Abner?"

"When you hear a squirrel chattering let her go," warned Bub. And he vanished noiselessly.

It seemed an interminable time to Stanley waiting. Once left alone he found his hand following Bub's example and shaking violently.



“It won’t do,” he growled, clinching his fist. “Come, my boy; brace up. The man on first is about to steal. It’s the best game I ever caught. Leighton knows I’ll place the ball in his hands at second. The crowd is cheering. I can hear Dumpy Scott coaching the runner, but it won’t mix me up any. Now, we’re steady, now we’re—”

The scolding chatter of a squirrel reached his ear, and with a masterful effort at control he threw back his arm and threw the stone.

The dull, crunching sound above their heads caused Ben and Joe to look up. Before they could appreciate their danger a swarm of infuriated wasps was upon them, stinging them viciously in the face and on the hands.

With a double scream of rage and pain the two clawed frantically at their heads and then holding their arms to protect the eyes dashed into the cover of the woods. By this time Abner, with eyes tightly closed was spluttering and crying aloud as some of the wasps shifted to him, and he did not notice the bowed figure at his side.

Suddenly he felt his bonds relax and forgetting his tormentors he stared dumbfounded at the wide-eyed Bub.

“Come, Abner. Follow me,” urged the



youth, taking the old man's hand and dragging him towards Stanley's position.

"Land of sin!" exclaimed Abner in a dreamy voice. "Not ghosts! Here, and alive! Is it real, or be I crazy?"

"These wasps are very real," panted Bub, forcing the old man to hasten his steps.

"But—but," spluttered Abner, not sensing the ruse. "I don't understand. I heard guns. Ye're here. Why, Reddy! Be ye real?"

Stanley clapped his shoulder warmly. "Wake up," he tersely commanded. "We have about a minute leeway. We've all escaped. It's all real."

"Glory be!" sobbed Abner, throwing an arm over each of their necks. "My boys! My boys! To think the younkens didn't fergit the old man! To think ye pulled it off! I could lar-rup ye fer coming when I made the signal that I was in trouble and meant fer ye to keep away."

"Compose yourself, Mr. Whitten," begged Stanley. "We're not free yet. They'll be on our track very shortly. We are depending upon your skill to save us."

This aroused Abner with a jerk, although he mumbled, "I'm 'bout starved. I ain't seen



food fer so long I don't know how it looks. My strength is most gone."

"We don't need strength," reminded Bub. "We need your knowledge of the woods. If they'd only dropped a gun when they ran away we'd stick right here."

"Wal, ye've saved old Abner," sniveled the veteran, "and I guess it's up to him to return the compliment. Lem'me take the lead."

Although weak from exhaustion and his long fast Abner got his second wind and in a few moments was picking a course to the southeast with all the caution and skill he had command of.

"Did you hear the guns?" whispered Bub, over Stanley's shoulder.

"I did," replied Abner. "I don't understand it. It mixes me up. If I knew what Nick and that other fiend was shooting at I'd be a great deal easier in my mind. But I can't figger it out. They must have seen the wind moving a bush and let go at it. That is, Pete prob'ly did. Nick wouldn't make that mistake."

"Where to now?" inquired Stanley.

"In a straight line till it's safe to hit Briar stream. Then we follow that back to Carlton's."



"And give up the Flat-Top search?" sighed Stanley.

A suppressed chuckle behind him evidenced that Bub was keenly enjoying the approaching climax.

"I wouldn't go back there ag'in fer all the spruce in New England," Abner shot back over his bowed shoulder. "Besides," and his tone was even more gloomy now, "I'm through with the Great Northern. I'll git a new job soon's I can hitch on to the warden's telephone."

"But I believe that we can prove the company's line," persisted Stanley.

"Reddy, say anything ye want to; ye've saved me twice. But if that there Bub makes a crack like that I'll larrup him the minute I come to a good oak limb. He's saved me only once. I'll take it from ye, Reddy, but not from a distant relation. Now, let's drop the subject."

"But I enjoy talking about it," remonstrated Stanley. "Think how proud we'd feel if we could go back successful."

"Keep it up," groaned Abner. "The wasps was pleasant little fellers alongside of such talk; but go ahead. Have yer say out."

"Anyway, it's worth something to say, 'I'm



working for the Great Northern because I never failed'," continued Stanley.

"Say," mumbled Abner, pausing, "if ye two keep on a bee-line I guess ye'll fetch out all right. I'm going back to Ben and Joe. It's not so unpleasant back there after all."

Regardless of the danger Bub gave a shriek of laughter and leaned weakly against a tree.

"Be ye mad?" cried Abner in a smothered voice. "What ye laffing at, ye young varmint? Want to git caught ag'in? Think I can spend all summer up here a gitting of ye loose?"

"Oh, Abner! Abner," exploded Bub. "Tell him, Stan. Tell him, before I drop."

"Mr. Whitten, I've found the ancient record," quietly informed Stanley.

"Found what?" asked Abner in a dazed voice.

"The original record. It was on the big beech we passed so many times. The bark had grown over it so it would never be noticed. I found it by accident, of course. I was idly tapping the tree and noticed the wood sounded dull and dead in one spot. When I cut away the bark there was the record. The two circles linked, cut by an arrow, showing the course, and beneath were the initials of the original owner."



For a count of ten Abner remained rigid, then he hoarsely begged, "Tell me ye ain't fooling. Tell me it's true; just as true as the wasps was. Ye ain't playing it low down on the old man, be ye, Reddy?"

"It's gospel truth," assured Stanley.

"Lawd! ain't I thankful," fervently cried the veteran, looking up at the dying sky, his eyes glowing with ecstasy.

But this mood was quickly replaced by one of the keenest apprehension, and he lamented, "If I could only have been there! Not to take the credit, but to advise ye what to do after ye'd made the bullseye. If only I could have stood at yer elbow and advised, 'Place that there bark'—"

"In a hollow log," mischievously broke in Bub.

"No!" rumbled Abner, tossing his arms about wildly. "But back on the tree, where no one would notice it."

"That's what I did," modestly informed Stanley, not wishing to tease the veteran longer.

"Boy! Reddy!" muttered Abner, catching him by both shoulders and glaring into his eyes. "Did ye really have brains enough to do that?"



"I don't believe even you would notice it in passing," said Stanley, reddening violently under the compliment of the veteran's clutch. "The trailer of lichen I passed across the trunk conceals my work entirely."

"After this," mumbled Abner in a low voice, "I'll tell folks that Reddy—I mean Mister Stanley Malcolm—took me kindly in charge on my last cruise. If anyone asks if ye're working fer me I'll say, 'Hardly, my friend. I am lucky to have a chance to work fer him.' "

"Nonsense, Mr. Whitten," gladly laughed Stanley. "I am awfully pleased over it because I knew it would please you. But all the credit is due to you. You allowed me to come, you have kindly allowed me to bother you. By a pure accident I find the record."

"But where are we going?" remonstrated Bub, as Abner abruptly resumed his course.

"Going?" he sniffed. "Where d'ye s'pose we was going? We're going after that there strip of bark."

"But the Nace outfit?" cried Bub.

"Bah! I ain't afraid of 'em now. We've won out and my fighting blood is up. We're going back to Flat-Top. Then we'll make the mills. *After* that I'll take a little vacation with Noisy Charlie and polish them gentlemen off a



bit. But there ain't no need of being careless, just because we feel tickled."

"I fear we have been too careless already," warned Stanley. "I am sure I heard someone breaking through the growth behind us."

"It's Ben and Joe," angrily informed Abner. "They move like cart horses. Easy enough to keep out of their reach, but a bullet travels dinged fast. Hump yerselves."

"He's straight ahead!" called out a rough voice not far behind.

"I'm closing in on him," informed a second.

"Be ye?" gritted Abner, increasing his gait. "By jing!" The last was exclaimed as he found himself on the edge of an opening. At either side the woods ended in a dead line. To advance would allow their pursuers an easy mark, unless the clearing could be crossed before the enemy reached it.

"Come on. Run as ye never did," whispered Abner, pulling his hat well forward and scuttling towards the line of growth in front. The youths could easily have outstripped him, but they purposely accommodated their pace to his. Just as they were within a few rods of the growth Ben broke through the cover behind and excitedly yelled, "Hi, Joe! This way. We've got them! Why! There are *three!*"



His amazement at finding three instead of one victim, led him to hesitate a second before firing. In that brief interval Abner sharply warned, "Drop!"

The trio went down as one and Ben's bullet whistled over Bub's prostrate body. The second villain by this time gained his comrade's side and took in the situation at a glance.

"Take yer time," he advised, cocking his rifle. "They can't make the woods. But I don't understand about them younkers. Now, ready!"

But the report that followed his words spouted from the forest ahead of the cruisers and was quickly followed by another. As Abner looked back he could not see either of his pursuers, although groans and the sound of heavy bodies threshing about on the ground were audible.

Then a tall figure stalked out from cover and advanced towards them.

"Noisy Charlie!" fairly screamed Stanley and Bub in unison.

"Howdy," saluted the Indian. With this greeting he continued on to the other side of the opening, where Ben and Joe were prostrate.

Abner and the youths followed him. The two villains were groaning fearfully, Ben with



a hole through his right lung and Joe shot through the hip.

"Are they dying?" whispered Stanley in an awed voice.

"No die," grunted the Indian, beginning to bind up the wounds and checking the flow of blood. Then he apologized, "Poor light. Bush in way. Fired quick; no good aim."

"What'll we do with them?" blankly inquired Abner, his mind centered on the Flat-Top ridge expedition.

"Lumber men near. I bring um," replied Charlie. "They take men back to mills. Git white medicine. Then go to jail. Leave um here and I send men."

"I told him to fetch up some of the Frenchmen to the old burn, where someone, prob'ly Nace, cut over the public lot. I thought mebbe some of our Frenchmen worked for Nace up there and could be used as witnesses against him," explained Abner, as he and the boys limped on after the Indian.

"Here! See something," suddenly said Charlie, turning to the right. Two rigid forms were stretched out on the ground, a blanket thrown over each.

"Big Nick. White man Pete," informed Charlie.



“Did you kill them?” gasped Bub, beginning to feel a trifle faint.

“No luck,” grumbled Charlie. “Kill each other. They hunt for someone; you, mebbe. They separate. White man see me, but I hide before he fire. Then Nick come through and white man think Nick me and fire. Nick dying git mad and fire back. Both dead. Good shooting.”

“Charlie, I want to shake hands,” humbly announced Stanley as they pursued their way to a point where strains of a logging song were emanating.

“Good boy,” said Charlie, clasping his hand quickly. “No ’fraid of fox, eh?” And his eyes shone with merriment for a moment.

Then he turned to Bub and slapped his shoulder. “This young fox. Grow to old fox. Smart boy.” The three understood by this that Charlie was paying Bub an elaborate compliment; he meant he would some time be as good a woodsman as Abner. The veteran, too, felt not a little pleased to be pointed out as an example.

Just as the sun sank and left the woods in darkness several campfires twinkled invitingly ahead, and with a loud growling noise Abner broke from the others and dashed into the



singing circle and quickly appropriated various bits of food from each surprised logger.

"Gim'me that coffee," he snapped, sweeping French Louey's tin dipper from his hand. "And that doughnut," he added, relieving another. And so on he levied tribute, until he had accumulated a large pile of edibles.

When the others came up French Louey made believe he was afraid of Stanley, whereat the latter laughed joyously and fairly hugged the rough fellow.

"No word for me, eh?" drawled a man on the edge of the circle.

"Why, Mr. White!" cried Stanley, grasping both of the calloused hands. "I'm awfully glad to see you."

After the greetings were over and the famished youths had eaten their fill, White informed Abner: "It's all clinched. Louey and three other of our men worked for Nace on the school lot. We've got him on the hip. He'll have to pay the stumpage back to the town."

"Good," cried Abner, his eyes twinkling. "I can't report to any one but Hatton, but I'll say this, fellers; Mister Nace is up against a lot of trouble."

"That's always good news," declared White.



“Now let’s have that song about, ‘He was drowned on the Allagash.’ ”

The wearied youths crawled thankfully under warm blankets, and lulled to sleep by the swinging chorus, began to recuperate from their strenuous exertions.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### PRESIDENT THAXTER ARRIVES

HATTON sat at his desk, cold of eye and calm in bearing. Opposite him sat Nace, a man with small, dull eyes and heavy jowls. Each was waiting for the other to continue the conversation. Finally Hatton pushed back his chair and observed:

"I am sorry you cannot wait till Mr. Thaxter arrives. I have no powers to complete the transaction without his consent."

"That's the trouble with working for a man who's president of a dozen different concerns," smiled Nace. "I've always worked for Number One."

"I can easily believe you have been very successful in looking out for Number One," sneered Hatton.

"What of it?" asked Nace sharply, his eyes glinting. "The Great Northern never got ahead of me much, eh?"

Hatton yawned carelessly, and replied, "Up to now there has never been any difference between us, Mr. Nace."



“Don’t Mister me,” said Nace. “I’m plain Jim Nace. I’m one of the boys. I work hard and live hard and no man can put a finger on any act of mine and say it’s crooked.”

“Nonsense,” smiled Hatton. “There is no need of this play-acting.”

Nace did not seem to resent this bit of skepticism, but grinned broadly as much amused, and modified, “Well, no one can prove any act of mine is crooked.”

Hatton tapped his desk impressively. “Now, Nace, I know you are crooked. There isn’t a straight hair in your head. But let’s be frank with each other. President Thaxter will be here this afternoon. I must have your ultimatum as to the Flat-Top holdings. We know your timber ends at the line we claim. I have men in the woods now to prove it.”

“And they’ll prove nothing,” serenely assured Nace.

“Perhaps,” agreed Hatton; “they may not. And if they do not I want to know how the matter shall be compromised. How much will you take for that timber if we decide not to carry the matter into court?”

Nace rose and shook his fist angrily at the manager, and shouted, “You have got in the way of thinking I am crooked and that because



of that belief you can always make terms with me. Now, Mister Hatton, I've got all the money I need, and that timber isn't for sale."

Hatton clicked his teeth and gently asked, "What do you intend to do then?"

"I intend to make your company back water. I propose to let every man in the state know that the Great Northern has met more than its match. You've got to go through with this thing now you've started it, and you'll go into court and admit you're mistaken and pay the costs. Then we'll see what about my counter claim for damages."

"Counter claim?" cried Hatton, shaken out of his habitual calm.

"Yes, sirree! Counter claim," triumphantly repeated Nace. "Think you can blacken my character and put me to a big expense to hold what's mine and then end the matter by simply refusing to sue? Hardly. I'm going to have damages, and big damages. After that point has been settled we'll see what about selling the land. It might be possible that I would set a price on it, providing you showed the proper spirit in doing what is just and fair."

"Just and fair," murmured Hatton in deep disgust. "You mean you believe you have a



gold mine in this affair and propose to make the company pay well."

"If you'd studied the situation a thousand years you couldn't have put it more neatly," cried Nace. "The Great Northern is going to pay well. More'n that; it's going to pay *big*."

"Then you have no word to send to our president?"

Nace hesitated, his eyes shining with a cunning light as he greedily canvassed his prospects. "Why, of course, I'm hot under the collar," he explained, rolling his eyes virtuously. "It's natural I should get mighty mad over the way the Great Northern has abused me. Still, I hope I am not a hard man. I want to be fair, even when I've been treated unfairly. I should say that if the company paid me fifty thousand dollars, for the slanders and for my actual money damages I would then be willing to give it an option on the timber. Yes, I'd do that."

"How much would you want for the timber?" quietly asked Hatton.

Nace pursed up his lips and frowned, as if meditating heavily. "Why, not to be too hard I should say about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars."



Hatton gasped, although expecting something exorbitant. "Whew!" he whistled. "A fifth of a million, eh? Why, you know the land can't be worth anywhere near that."

"Remember that fifty thousand is for slander and the like," grinned Nace.

"And if we refuse you will sue and be beaten and will end with the timber on your hands," reminded Hatton.

"Guess I can find a purchaser all right," grinned Nace, thoroughly enjoying the situation.

Hatton's gaze hardened. "And where, pray?"

"I have an idea the Consolidated Pulp company wants to break into Maine. It's got big holdings in New Hampshire."

The name of this company was a red flag to Hatton, as it was the only prospective rival the Great Northern had. But he showed no sign of his rage as he calmly remarked, "Well, there is no hurry. The suit can't be called in court till the fall term. My cruisers will return shortly and tell me what they find. We might not want the timber anyway. I don't even know as we could get it out from the ridge, or how much it will cut."

Nace laughed coarsely, and jeered, "I'll bet



you don't know a thing about it. By the way, who did you send up there?"

"Abner Whitten," promptly replied Hatton.

"What! Abner still working for you? Why, one of my men met him up at Hood mountain and he said he was through and was going to get a job with the Feenys up on Chesuncook."

"I had not heard of his quitting us," quietly returned Hatton, but inwardly disturbed as he remembered his parting injunction to Abner, not to come back till he had succeeded. He had not meant that order, but he knew the veteran was so sensitive that he might be likely to seek employment elsewhere.

"Sorry I can't wait for Thaxter," said Nace, moving towards the door. "But as you say, there's plenty of time."

"Hold on, Nace," said Hatton brusquely. "Let's quit beating around the bush. Thaxter will expect to see you. You are out after the money. All this slander suit talk is rot and you know it. You want money and nothing else. Thaxter is the man to treat with. He'll do better by you than the Consolidated people will. If you've got us where the wool is short you'd better make the best of it and see the president."



Nace was deeply impressed by this and showed it by the way his heavy face lengthened out. Then he admitted, "Of course I'm after the money. So is the Great Northern. I insist I've been rather cut up by the way the company has knocked me, but as you say there's no use in my cutting off my nose to spite my face. I'll be here at eight o'clock sharp to-morrow morning to talk with Thaxter. Maybe, we can arrive at some agreement."

Left alone the manager's facial expression changed. It was as if he had slipped aside a mask, revealing the true Hatton. Deep lines drew down his mouth and he bowed his head in his hands to think.

As Abner had said it was he who had taken a hostile initiative against Nace and had placed the company on record as intending to sue the scheming operator. He could see now that he had moved too fast. The papers throughout New England had played up the proposed suit for columns. Nace had raged and was reported as laying large wagers that he would retain the land till he saw fit to sell it. Public opinion had been with the company. It seemed preposterous to believe that the all-powerful



Great Northern would take a stand without being assured of success.

Realizing all this Hatton dreaded the coming interview with Thaxter. As yet he had not revealed the true state of affairs to the president. Now it must be done and he feared for his superior's wrath. It was not a question of money and timber lands alone, but prestige was at stake.

No word had come from Abner since the Indian guide had returned to the Kennebago wangan and had sent word that all Frenchmen, who had ever worked for Nace, should be sent over to him for a trip in the woods. He did not even know for what purpose the men were wanted, but had hoped that the veteran had some shrewd scheme under way. He had talked with Carlton over the telephone and had learned of Abner's departure for Flat-Top. The encounter with Big Nick had not impressed him as being of any moment, nor easily charged up against Nace. It was he, himself, who had first incurred the half-breed's hatred.

He still was confident that Nace had swindled them. But this conviction would in no way mollify the president's displeasure, unless sustained by proofs.



Throughout the afternoon he remained at his desk, transacting the routine of the mills with the same calm demeanor that always characterized his dealings with the foremen. But when alone his head would drop in his hands as he again tested every link in the chain that was holding him down.

“With never a failure against his record, to think Abner must fail now,” he muttered. Then in self-accusation, “But I was a fool, a fool. Why didn’t I move more cautiously? When Carlton could find nothing I should have known Whitten couldn’t, unless by some miracle. And he has failed.”

A step at the door caused him to spring up and smooth out his features. The door opened and in walked Roscoe W. Thaxter, multimillionaire and president of the Great Northern.

“Hello, Hatton, glad to see you,” cordially greeted Thaxter, helping himself to a chair. “We must get down to business, as I have an automobile outside to take me back to my private car where I shall sleep to-night. What about this pipe line for pulp?” And the president pulled out a memorandum and studied it critically.

“Mr. Thaxter, that was an idea given me by a



youth who is employed here. I shall always be sorry I never thought of it myself," replied Hatton.

"I see," murmured the president. "It's a good idea. A fine one. We must do something for the youth. He may grow up into a manager some day, eh?" And the president smiled good naturedly. "Make mention of him in writing to the Boston office next time. Put the line through at once. It will be a great saving. Hm! Let me see. What else was there? The ore—No, that's copper. Ah, here it is," and producing his spectacles the president slowly read from his small book, "In re Flat-Top ridge disputed line."

Hatton cleared his throat and said, "I fear that Nace has the under hold in that matter. He's crooked, but I don't see how we can prove it."

Pulling his spectacles to the tip of his nose the president stared at the cold-faced man in amazement for a moment, and then exploded, "What! What's this? You mean to tell me the Great Northern can be done up by a swindler?"

Hatton could have replied that swindlers are usually the persons who "do people up," but he coughed gently and replied, "There seems to



be no way by which we can prove the swindle.”

“But a swindle is a swindle. It’s a self-evident fact. If he’s swindling us why can’t we prove it?”

“I’ve sent men up there repeatedly, the best men in the state. My best cruiser is out on that work now,” explained Hatton. “But while I may believe we are being swindled, if we can’t prove it, what are we to do?”

“I should say that the Great Northern needed a new president, and a new manager in this region,” sternly replied Thaxter. “Why, sir! you calmly tell me we are being swindled. I look at my memorandum book, the figures supplied by you, and I find the timber is estimated at one hundred thousand dollars at least.”

“I believe those figures are a bit below the mark,” said Hatton, who always sought to be scrupulously exact in conferring with his superior.

“Huh!” ejaculated Thaxter. “And we lose that, eh?”

“Mr. Thaxter, unless we come to terms with Nace I fear we shall,” earnestly assured Hatton.

“What! treat with him? Never,” said the president firmly.



“Then he’ll treat with the Consolidated,” warned Hatton.

“Hatton, you have got us into a pretty kettle of fish,” condemned Thaxter. “My secretary has preserved I don’t know how many newspaper articles in which this matter has been widely exploited. Now, by your premature actions we will be made the laughing stock of the whole country. The company’s allied interests will suffer. It means we have lost our prestige, sir.”

Hatton bowed and quietly regretted, “It has been a deep source of pain to me, Mr. Thaxter, to have involved the company in an unwholesome situation. I have my resignation written out to take effect immediately. I will now present it.”

“What good will your resignation do me, or the company?” cried Thaxter. “You’ve been a valuable man for us, Hatton. We had high hopes of you. We had intended to advance you to higher affairs. Keep your resignation, but the advancement must wait until this muddle is satisfactorily cleared up.”

“I thank you,” murmured Hatton. “But my loyalty to the company compels me to advise that we compromise with Nace. He is a coarse, brutal, greedy man. His demands will



be exorbitant, but if we can trim them down to decent proportions we will do well to hush the matter up. It will keep out the Consolidated and we will be able to save our face. Needless to say, never again will I be caught in such a trap."

"I should imagine once would do for a lifetime," sarcastically replied Thaxter. "Well, it's like taking a nasty dose of medicine, but if we must go through with it, we must. If it wasn't for the Consolidated people I'd never consent to any compromise. He might steal my timber, but he should never sell it to me."

"Very well," said Hatton, his heart beating high with elation as he believed the worst of the storm was past; "he'll be here at eight o'clock in the morning to discuss the matter with you."

"What! he'll make appointments, set the hour, and tell me when he'll see me?" fumed Thaxter. "I'll not see him."

"But, my dear sir; he undoubtedly realized you are a very busy man and must be seen at that hour, or not at all," soothed Hatton.

"I can't see him after that hour, but—well, well, what's the use. Send word to the scoundrel that he may call on me here at the hour



you suggest. Now, I'll return to my car and see if I can get a little peace and quiet."

As Hatton was politely opening the door for him Abner stepped across the threshold and dropped his knapsack into a chair.

"I'll receive your report later, Abner," informed Hatton.

"Abner? Abner who?" quickly asked the president, turning. "What do you do, Abner?"

"Who might ye be?" asked Abner.

"I might be a wise man and surrounded by intelligent foremen. But I'm simply the president of the company that runs these mills here."

"Wal, if it's yer company what pays my wages I'll say my name is Abner Whitten, timber cruiser and walking-boss fer the Great Northern. I am now ready to report on the Flat-Top ridge matter."

"He's the cruiser I was speaking of," hastily explained Hatton, wishing to be rid of the veteran for fear the president would change his mind and become irascible again.

"Huh!" exclaimed the president, moving back to his chair. "Well, go ahead. I'm the boss here now. What did you find?"



"It was a hopeless quest from the start," began Hatton, when Thaxter broke in:

"Will you kindly consider yourself on a vacation, sir, for a few minutes? Now, my man, what did you find? Bring me what I call good news and I'll give you five thousand dollars."

Abner's hand, reaching for the knapsack was slowly withdrawn, and he asked, "But if I bring good news because I was helped by two youngers and a Injun will ye make it five thousand dollars apiece?"

"Nonsense, Abner—" warned Hatton.

"Remember that vacation, or you'll take an indefinite one," growled Thaxter. Then to Abner, "What are you trying to do? Play a Nace trick on me?"

"I ain't trying no tricks," replied Abner indignantly. "As fer vacations ye have a timber cruiser what'll take one fer good so fer as ye and yer old company is concerned if he hears any more words like them. What d'ye mean talking five thousand dollars to me? I come in here ready to file my report. If ye want to make me a present of five thousand dollars and are willing to make the same to my three companions—always previding the news is worth it—why, say so. If ye don't there's no harm



done. Ye'll git yer report without a penny."

"Stop! stop! Will you stop? Silence, sir," roared Thaxter. Then very mildly, "Abner, I'm beginning to like you. I'm not in the habit of making presents to men who simply do their duty. But I'm worked up over this Flat-Top ridge proposition. If you bring me news that will help me beat this man Nace I'll give you the five thousand dollars and—how old are these other two?"

"Sixteen years apiece and growing like sin."

"Hm. I see. Well, say, fifteen hundred each and the same to the Indian. Yes, I'll do that."

"Hooray!" shouted Abner. "We'll pool the money and divide it even among Charlie, the two boys and me. Bub gits all I leave when I die, anyway. Here's the report."

To the amazement of the president and manager he pulled a strip of bark from the knapsack and laid it on the desk.

"What tomfoolery is this?" demanded the president, moving to hurl the bark aside.

"Hands off!" warned Abner, pouncing upon the precious exhibit. "Don't ye know it's a'gin the law to destroy monuments like that? Want to be another Jim Nace? That's the



proof ye're about to part with nine thousand five hundred dollars—plus our reg'lar wages, of course—to git. Here! look!"

And removing the mirror from over the washstand he held the bark before it. "See them two circles, linked, with the arrer and the initials? This bark was cut off'n the ancient beech on yer genuine line by my companion, Reddy, also known as Rusty and Fire-Weed. We earned all ye'll gin us a gitting it down here."

"They've turned the trick!" cried Hatton. "You won't have to see Nace."

"Do you mean this is one of the original boundary marks?" eagerly asked the president.

"It are," solemnly assured Abner. "The big beech is still standing with the record on its trunk. It has been examined by Noisy Charlie, the younkers and all of the Frenchmen. If it's cut down afore we git up there ag'in we have all the proof we want."

"Then I want to see Nace," grimly decided the president. "Let no word of this get out. It will be a pleasure for me to see Mr. Nace, and at eight, sharp. What else, Friend Abner?"

"Wal, not much of anything. O yes; Big



Nick and a feller named Pete, shot each other to death while trying to kill Bub and Reddy. Pete thought he was shooting Charlie and the half-breed killed him just to have company, I guess. Then there's two scoundrels called Ben and Joe. We left 'em up Rangeley way. Both plugged rather seriously, but they'll git well enough to go to prison."

"I'm glad I did not offer a thousand for each item," smiled the president, now completely restored to good nature. "Anything else?"

"I vum! I plum fergot," cried Abner. "We found where Nace cut over a public lot. The Frenchmen remembered working fer him on it. So we've got a clear case ag'in him. He'll have to turn over some twelve thousand dollars to the town. And I guess that's all and I'll be going."

"But I am interested in you. Wait a bit," invited the president.

"And I'm interested in Reddy out there and must hustle out—"

"Have him in here," commanded the president.

"It's the youth who thought of the pulp pipe line," reminded Hatton. Then from the door, "Here, Reddy. Come in here."



Perhaps Hatton and Abner were never more amazed in their lives when the youth halted on the threshold and in a dazed voice gasped, "Uncle Ross!"



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### CONCLUSION

It would be impossible to state which of the quartette was the most astonished. As Stanley cried out President Thaxter sprang forward and clasped him in his arms. For once in his life Hatton lost his composure; the amazement on his usually cold face rivalling that depicted by Abner's angular features.

"Mr. Thaxter! Is this your—your nephew?" finally cried Hatton, as he beheld the former kitchen boy in the magnate's embrace.

"Our Reddy his nevvv!" stuttered Abner, pressing both hands to his head.

"Leave us for a while," requested Thaxter in a low voice.

Hatton and Abner stumbled out of the door and stared at each other dumbly. The arrival of Bub on the scene loosened their tongues and each sought to be the first to proclaim the astounding news.

Bub's eyes and mouth opened very wide as he gathered the truth from their disjointed exclamations.



"It doesn't seem real," muttered Bub.

"They're both in there now, a-hugging each other," excitedly assured Abner.

"Stanley Malcolm is undoubtedly President Thaxter's nephew," declared Hatton, slowly returning to his normal cast of countenance.

"And to think how ye refused him the chance to go with me to Flat-Top," murmured Abner.

Hatton winced. "Of course I'm not supposed to know who a strange boy is who gives no account of himself," he defended. "Had I known he was related to President Thaxter I should have given him a reception worthy of his high connections—that is, insofar as my humble means would permit."

"Then I'm mighty glad ye didn't know," cried Abner. "Fer then I'd never had a chance to get acquainted with one of the best youngers that ever made fool mistakes in the woods."

"And the Great Northern would not have won the fight against Jim Nace," added Bub, dancing about for sheer joy.

At this point Thaxter opened the office door and motioned the three to enter. Bub and Abner were diffidently hanging back when Stanley looked over his uncle's shoulder and commanded, "Hi, you two. Come in here.



You've bullied me in the woods, but I'm boss now. Hustle along."

"I didn't know I was combing down the president's nephew," grinned Abner nervously.

"You were just as good a fellow, Stan, when I first met you as you are now," earnestly declared Bub.

"My nephew is fortunate in falling in with you two," warmly spoke up Thaxter, grasping the veteran and Bub by the hand. "It was the making of him. Naturally you are all curious to know several things. Shall I tell it, Stanley, or will you?"

"You explain, Uncle," replied Stanley.

Thaxter rested a hand on Stanley's shoulder and began: "This youth is the only child of my dear, dead sister. I have no kith or kin except him. He was never a boy who abused his position, but his natural disposition was er—er—"

"Overbearing and despicable," supplied Stanley quickly.

"No, not as bad as that," fondly smiled Thaxter. "But we two sometimes failed to agree. Not that Stanley was guilty of any wrongdoing, but he was headstrong about school matters and I was firm in my ways. The



result was that when he wished to change his school I refused to consent. I was not particularly pleased with his standing in school and scolded him a bit too severely, I fear. At last I was foolish enough to tell him he was dependent on me and could not earn his salt if cast upon the world. We were in New York at the time. He replied that he could, if allowed the opportunity like other boys. I laughed at him.

“In the morning he was gone. I smiled, thinking he was sulking at the home of some friend. As several days went by I made inquiries. Then I became alarmed. I hired detectives and quietly instituted a search of the whole country; only, I never dreamed of his being up in Maine. I knew he had talked of going to Mexico some time and feared that he was down there. The unsettled condition of the country added to my alarm, and it was in the Southwest that we searched the closest.

“Now by accident I find him up here—manly and capable to earn his own way. My friends, you have no idea of my gratification in learning that he has fought his way without asking for help on the strength of his name. He knew that he could draw on me for any amount at



any time. Yet my bankers tell me he has never asked for a penny. By and by I shall want Bub and Mr. Whitten to fill in the gaps he has left open."

"It is your nephew who suggested the pulp pipe line," broke in Hatton.

"He has not told me that," cried the delighted president.

"We always called him Reddy and Rusty," added Bub.

"Dear! dear!" murmured the president. "To think of a Malcolm, a nephew of a Thaxter, being styled by such a common nickname."

"I liked it," stoutly insisted Stanley. "It made me feel like other boys. I was heartily tired of being bowed to and waited upon. I think it was that that in part caused me to get sour and disagreeable. However, I want to say right here that a fellow never had a better friend and uncle than I have. All the fault has been mine, and as Abner has so often said I needed to be 'larruped.'"

"Hold on, Reddy—I mean Mister Malcolm," protested Abner. "Them remarks was made to a younker that needed 'em. I might have spoke different, if I'd—no, I'll tell the truth. I guess I'd said it anyway."

"That sounds better," laughed Thaxter.



“What a joke if Mr. Whitten had birched you, my boy.”

“I’d stood for it,” grinned Stanley. Then observing the gathering gloom on Bub’s face he quickly asked, “But, Mr. Thomas, why this castdown look? Aren’t you glad to find I’m what I am?”

“I don’t see why I should be,” slowly decided Bub. “I’m selfish, I guess. I found a friend, a rattling good fellow. Now I lose him. I guess I would have preferred to have you remain Reddy—and making mistakes.”

“None of that,” fiercely warned Stanley, shaking Bub by the shoulders. “I’m just the same as I was up on Flat-Top. I shall always be Reddy to you. Discovering my uncle makes no difference in my feelings for you and Abner.”

“Red—Stanley, do you mean that?” cried the delighted youth

“I vum! I believe he does,” muttered Abner.

“See here, you two,” angrily declared Stanley. “What do you think I am? Didn’t you two take me up and befriend me when I didn’t have as many friends or as much to eat as the cook’s dog? Are you mean enough to think



that any amount of money would change my feelings for you two?"

"Forgive me, Stan," blurted Bub. "But it is all so strange that I can't think straight."

"Mr. Malcolm will accompany you back to town?" politely inquired Hatton.

"No," smiled Stanley. "Reddy Malcolm will put in the summer with Bub in prospecting for amethysts and tourmalines and fresh water pearls, and on the side look after things up north for the company. Abner Whitten will be assigned to look after us."

"As my successor to be," gravely informed Thaxter, "my nephew's orders will be accepted by you, Hatton, as if they came from me. You can rest assured that he will not overstep or interfere with your routine duties, or ever ask anything unreasonable. But if he asks for men, or any kind of help you will be pleased to accommodate him, I know."

"What Mr. Malcolm says will go with me," suavely returned Hatton.

"I knew it would," said Thaxter, his lips curling in a slight smile.

"How about Laura?" asked Bub.

"We've talked of her and her father," said Stanley. "My uncle will arrange for Profes-



sor Carlton to enter upon his chosen work in Colorado this fall."

"Guess ye thought of everything," admired Abner. "Now as ye two want to be alone and chin I'll go over and eat a snack."

"We have even thought of that," smiled Thaxter. "You two will accompany Stanley and me back to my private car, where we will see what Josef, my chef, has good for dinner."

"Supper," mechanically corrected Abner, his eyes glistening.

"We'll make it a combination of both," laughed Stanley.

"See here, my son," whispered Bub aside, "I don't want to go down there. I'm not use to that sort of thing. I'd feel ashamed."

"Quit that," sternly ordered Stanley. "By the same line of argument I shouldn't have gone north to feel ashamed of my greenness. To the car you go and Josef will give Abner a meal that he'll remember ever after. I know Josef of old, and he'll be that tickled to see me that he'll throw on all the style at his command."

"I ain't just dressed fer polite company," Abner was beginning to remonstrate, but Thaxter caught his arm and led him to the door, saying:



"It is I who am in the best of company. The man who saved my boy's life is the best company I shall ever enjoy. Say no more. I am only sorry that that splendid Indian fellow is not here to go with us."

"I do not believe Noisy Charlie would care to go with us," said Stanley. "We must do something handsome for him, if we can only find the right way. Maybe, Abner can help us out on that."

"I'll do anything fer Charlie," said Abner earnestly. "It was really the Injun that pulled us all through."

"No one shall be forgotten," assured Thaxter. "Stanley has made a memorandum of all of his friends. There is a White and a McPherson and a French Louey—"

"Let's not go into that," blushed Stanley.

"We'd better be hurrying," worried Abner. "If I'm going to eat in a railroad car I don't want the supper to git cold. S'pose that cookee of yer'n will have some hot tea? Don't want him to bother to make it, but if he's got any on the back of the stove I'd like a cup, I guess. All these happenings sort of make me nervous."

"You shall have all the tea you can drink," promised Stanley. "And strawberries and—"



“Hold on,” warned Abner. “Don’t show yer ignorance before yer Uncle, Reddy. Strawberries don’t grow at this time of year. Kind of slipped, eh?”

“Wait and see,” smiled Stanley, winking at Bub.

After Abner had been pushed into the back seat of the machine with Stanley and Bub on either side of him, Hatton humbly reminded, “Does that interview with Nace stand?”

“Certainly. I’ll be here on the hour. Mr. Whitten and the boys will stop with me to-night. We’ll all be here. Only you need not say anything to Nace about my nephew, or their discovery on Flat-Top.”

“Most assuredly not,” said Hatton, bowing his way back to the office.

That night Abner was in wonderland. With no conception of a private car he had imagined he was to be taken to the usual rough and ready coach used on roads penetrating the lumber district and be entertained with a nondescript lunch.

Josef, overcome to behold his favorite, no sooner learned Stanley’s wishes than he bestirred himself to an unusual degree. Thaxter, a man of quiet habits and plain tastes, was almost surprised into betraying his amuse-



ment when the four sat down to the table and Abner was besieged with the various dishes, including strawberries. At the end of the meal, when the veteran could eat no more, he anxiously asked:

“Is this same feller to cook breakfast?”

“Josef cooks all my meals when I am at home or in my car,” informed Thaxter.

“All right,” sighed Abner. “I’m glad I’m going to bunk here to-night. Hope he’ll have some of that cold sweet stuff.”

Stanley chuckled, but took an opportunity to order ice cream for breakfast.

Promptly at eight o’clock next morning Nace entered the office, wearing his hat at an aggressive angle. He was confident that he had won his fight and was about to add nearly a quarter of a million to his already moderate fortune. His salutation to Hatton was curt and sharp. The manager, in turn, was meek and mild in bearing and rubbed his hands nervously.

“Kind of upset at the thought of having the boss here this morning, eh?” grinned Nace.

“He was much put out yesterday afternoon when I told him that we were helpless,” mumbled Hatton. “It even reached a point where I offered to resign.”

“Ha! ha!” chuckled Nace. “Well, if you



git fired maybe I can find something for you to do."

"Thank you," murmured Hatton. "Here comes President Thaxter."

"Who's that with him?" scowled Nace.

"Only Abner Whitten and the two boys, known as Bub and Reddy," quietly replied Hatton.

"Whitten! Why, I thought he—that is, I did not expect him," faltered Nace, his jaw dropping.

"Yes, he got out alive; also brought the boys," said Hatton simply.

"I don't know what you mean by such talk," cried Nace, his mouth tightening. "Why are they coming here? I was to meet old Thaxter alone."

"That will do," growled Hatton, knocking Nace's hat from his head. "You are about to meet President Thaxter. And remember your manners."

Nace started as if about to reach for a weapon, but Hatton's hand resting in a drawer of the desk caused him to change his mind.

"President Thaxter, this is Jim Nace," briefly announced Hatton, never removing his eyes from the operator.

"I have but a moment," informed Thaxter.



“And I object to having this crowd here,” hotly cried Nace, half rising from his chair.

“This crowd is composed of my nephew, Stanley Malcolm, and his two good friends, Mr. Whitten and Mr. Thomas,” quietly resumed Thaxter. “Now for business. How much are you worth?”

“None of your business!” cried Nace, his heavy face revealing his bewilderment.

“On the contrary it is my business,” smoothly assured Thaxter. “I have an important proposition to make.”

Instantly Nace saw himself investing in the Great Northern and becoming one of its heads. “Why, I guess I could scare up a hundred thousand pretty quick,” he lazily replied.

“I see,” mused Thaxter. “Very well; we’ll have to proceed on that theory. You will give Noisy Charlie, the Indian guide, the sum of ten thousand dollars. You will give a like amount to Abner Whitten. You will divide a third ten thousand between my nephew and Mr. Thomas.”

“Give thirty thousand dollars!” gasped Nace in a dazed voice.

“Yes; no man can say I ever bore down too severely,” returned Thaxter.



"But why—what do I get in return?" puzzled Nace, beads of sweat now dotting his red forehead.

"You will be allowed to remain outside of state-prison until some new piece of crookedness lands you there," calmly answered Thaxter.

"What d'ye mean! How dare you talk to me in such a slanderous way?" bellowed Nace. "I'll have the law on you. These men are witnesses that—"

"Sit down," coldly warned Hatton, tapping something hard in the drawer.

"This is a hold-up," choked Nace, his eyes now roving about the room as if seeking a place to escape.

"Besides doing what I have directed you will turn over to the town owning the public lot, which you cut and then burned over, the sum of twelve thousand dollars, which Mr. Whitten says will cover the stolen stumpage. Of course the town will put in its surveyors to verify Mr. Whitten's estimate."

"Is that all?" huskily asked Nace.

"Not quite. You will cause to be printed within three days an announcement that you have withdrawn from politics and will never



participate in them again. It will be printed over your signature."

"Now, hear me!" roared Nace rising. "I don't know what your game is, but your city bluff won't go. I don't know what you mean by my stealing school timber. It is just another cause for a slander suit—"

"Tut, tut, man. Cease being foolish," impatiently advised Thaxter. "We have the very workmen you employed when you cut over that lot."

Nace licked his dry lips in silence for a few moments, and then hoarsely announced, "If I've got over a line I'll pay the shot. But you talk in riddles. I came here to discuss my Flat-Top ridge holdings."

"I don't want to buy your holdings," said Thaxter. "Your timber is sparse and too high up the ridge. We have all we care for on that watershed."

"But my eighty acres," muttered Nace.

"If you mean the timber you have claimed against us, the courts will settle that title if you do not relinquish your claim within a day or so."

"Never!" shouted Nace, now thoroughly enraged and bewildered. "You talk like a crazy



man with your demands on my pocketbook. You can be—”

“Show him the bark,” directed Thaxter. “He annoys me with his coarse ways.”

Abner stepped to the desk and brought out the beech panel and held it up before Nace’s dull eyes. “It was taken from the boundary tree, on *our* line,” grinned the cruiser. “The tree is there now.”

Nace gave a bellow and was about to clutch the precious bark, but Abner drew it from his reach, while something clicked in Hatton’s concealed hand. “Easy, Nace,” warned the manager.

Then Thaxter concisely outlined the case against the cornered operator, informing him of the death of two of his henchmen and the arrest of the other two. “I would prosecute you for their attempt at murder, but I might not be able to secure a conviction,” he concluded. “So I strike at your pocketbook and drive you from politics. Needless to say your life would not be worth much if ever you go into the woods again. When may I expect you to send out certified checks for the sums mentioned?”

“Within two days,” surrendered Nace, now utterly humbled.



"Then I think you may go," said Thaxter.

After the operator had stumbled from the office Thaxter turned to the boys and said, "How about school?"

"When I return Bub goes with me," replied Stanley. "I only ask for this summer with the privilege of requesting a longer vacation this fall. I will not ask for the latter unless during the summer I make up my studies so that I will not fall behind should I stay out a year. Bub is ahead of me now and we can study together; but I do want to see more of this life."

"See how he's putting on flesh and muscle," admired Abner. "When he come here he was thin as a herring. A season in the woods would be mighty good schooling fer him."

Thaxter pondered deeply. "I'll see about it," he finally announced. "You may have the summer and we'll talk over the fall and winter plans later. Now make out a list of things you want me to send down and I'll be going back. I must be in Boston to-night."

"For one thing, send all the books you can on geology and the minerals of Maine," laughed Stanley, writing it down as he spoke. "Then the handsomest rifle you can find for Charlie."



“Better quit talking and do more writing,” advised Abner.

“And we’ll give Mr. Thaxter the best stone we find this summer for a ring or scarf-pin,” cried Bub.

“I have it!” cried Stanley. “Among other things we’ll work Miss Laura’s amethyst pocket.”

“Guess I’ll go over and see what we’re going to have fer dinner,” said Abner.

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THE END





















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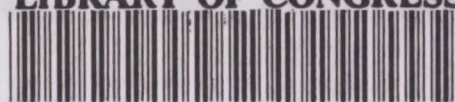


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